

'FOREVER KNIGHT' FICTION by
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Three of a Kind

a Forever Knight novella

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CHAPTER ONE

Natalie had her coat over her arm and one hand on the door as the phone rang. She glanced back at it, then at Grace, who was standing by the desk, also picking up her coat.

"You've had a full shift," warned Grace.

Natalie shook her head wearily and answered. "No rest for the wicked. It's probably someone calling in sick."

But something in her gut warned her that this wasn't the case, especially as Grace's own weary smile turned into a frown within the first few seconds of the call. "How many?" Grace asked.

That was never good—multiple homicide. After a full shift and an on-site call for one of Schanke and Nick's cases? Leaning her head on the door, Natalie decided that she might just let the next shift take over.

Until Grace's eyes widened and she met Natalie's gaze, still speaking into the receiver. "We've got three wagons on call. I don't know how many more—"

Shrugging into her coat, Natalie stepped back into Grace's line of sight and gave up on getting home before noon. She kept only half an ear on the conversation, automatically sorting through materials that she'd need for a multiple-homicide or accident. Why did these things always happen just after dawn on the night after a busy shift?

Finally, Grace hung up the phone. Natalie turned, then gestured toward the extra supplies she'd gathered. "How bad?"

"They don't have a count on the casualties yet. They can't get inside. It's a fire—five alarms. A nightclub."

Natalie swallowed, glancing away for a moment as she realized the implications . . . burned bodies. "Okay. Let's send the wagons we've got. Bring one of the last shifts back on call and let's hope we don't need them. The ambulances will have to handle the overflow." She picked up one of the extra cases and sighed. "At least it wasn't last night—God knows how many we would have had with a full crowd. If we're very lucky there weren't any staff or cleaning people on duty. Accident or arson?"

"They didn't say." Grace reached for the phone again. "I'll tell dispatch to direct the recalls to you at the Raven."

Natalie was half-way to the door, but the word stopped her. A cold chill ran through her as she stared back at Grace, horrified. "The Raven?"

"I think that's the name of the club." Grace checked the form on which she'd written the dispatch information and nodded. "Yep—it's at—"

"I know where it is." Natalie dropped the case containing extra body bags and hit the doors at a run. "Call Nick!" she instructed over her shoulder, knowing that Grace was following her.

She saw Grace step into the hall, holding the case containing the extra body bags. "But what about—?"

Natalie continued down the hall, then to the stairwell, taking two and three steps at a time when she dared. The elevator would be too slow. She had to get there *now*! She'd be the only one who'd know enough to get the vampires who'd survived to the cover of darkness. God only knew how many of the regulars who hung out there also lived there. It was so close to dawn, if she could get there in time, she might just save some of them from the fire. And those she couldn't save—

Hitting the door to the outer parking lot, Natalie stopped long enough to fill her tortured lungs with air

and decided she was right in not bothering with the extra body bags.
They wouldn't be needed.

CHAPTER TWO

He was burning.

The stench of charred cloth and flesh and hair clung to his nostrils. The flames caressed him, attacked him, feeding from his flesh as he'd fed from the blood of so many others during his time. There was no escape, no where to run. He turned, instinctively searching for some way out of this fiery hell, and broken and falling beams crashed around him. He became entangled in lengths of chain hanging from the ceiling, the metal red hot and searing, breaking as he batted them away but burning loop-like brands into the skin on his hands and face. It hurt too much to continue.

Better to die. Better to surrender to the inferno and fall to ash beneath its onslaught. But even surrender brought no relief. Sinking to the warped and broken parquet floor, he could still feel the flickers of fire tearing at his flesh, burning through to his soul . . .

Disoriented, Nick tumbled from the couch, knocking the coffee table aside in his haste to escape from the flames.

But there were no flames. No fire. The scents of the dream smoke still clung to his memory and he raised himself to his knees, threw back his head and breathed deeply in an attempt to banish it with cool, clean air.

Nick knew he was safe here, in the loft, although it took a moment for his shaking to stop. The gold slipped from his eyes and his fangs receded as he leaned back onto his haunches and wiped his face with his hands. They came away streaked with droplets of blood—he'd been sweating.

Taking another deep breath, Nick forced himself to relax. It had been a dream, not a memory. He'd been trapped by fire in the past, but never so completely and utterly imprisoned. And he'd never surrendered to it. If he had . . . well, he wouldn't be here, now, kneeling on the floor of the loft in the clothing he'd worn the night before, sweating, heart racing, and senses fogged by the fear of flame.

The ringing phone startled him. For an instant he was tempted to let it ring through to his answering machine. Some inner sense told him that it was close to sunrise; he'd only been asleep for a few minutes. And he'd need his sleep today—he had a busy night ahead of him. There were still three witnesses to interview about the Manning case and his particular brand of persuasion might just mean the difference between solving this tonight or forcing Schanke to postpone his vacation plans.

The answering machine message went on as he grasped the arm of the couch and hauled himself to his feet, still a little shaky. Half a bottle of blood would calm him down. Maybe then he'd be able to get some rest. That nightmare had been too realistic for his taste.

He froze at the sound of Grace's voice on the answering machine, her tone not quite desperate, but indicating alarm.

"Nick? Natalie asked me to call you. There's been—"

Reaching over the table, he knelt on the couch and picked up the receiver. "Grace, I'm here."

"Oh—good." There was a pause as she took a deep breath. "Dispatch just notified us of a fire—five alarms. Natalie asked me to call you."

The word 'fire' sent a chill up his spine and he found himself glancing around nervously, still trying to banish the memory of his dream. "Fire?" Nick forced himself to concentrate on his current case load and couldn't come up with any that might be connected. "Have they found a body? I don't have any outstanding cases right now that—"

"All I know is that Natalie told me to call you and then she high-tailed it out of here to the scene. It's a club—'The Raven.'"

He drew in a breath at her words and felt the dream memory of the smoke and fire searing his lungs. Coughing, he held the phone to his chest until the sensation passed.

"Are you okay?" asked Grace. "I can give you the address. It's on—"

"I know where it is. Thanks, Grace." Not waiting for her reply, Nick dropped the receiver into the cradle and ran for the closet. His leather gloves and his hat were there. He tried not to think about the sunlight as he pulled the gloves over his fingers, then jammed the hat down on his head. He couldn't afford to let the fear take hold of him.

But the dream scent of burning flesh and clothing still clung to his nostrils as he ran for the Caddie.

CHAPTER THREE

Traffic had been almost non-existent—it was barely dawn, after all, and few people had even awakened and risen to make their morning coffee yet. Natalie decided that it was a strange world in which she'd chosen to live; when other people were rising, she was ready to pull the covers over her head.

But not this morning. Her yawns were dispelled by the clang and clatter of the fire engines clustered around the exterior of the Raven, gleaming frighteningly red in the early morning light. Many of the black and yellow clad firemen on the scene were running to and fro with hoses and hatchets, others were clustered together with a floor plan of the building, or beginning to remove ladders from the sides of the sides of the trucks.

Natalie parked her car just beyond the immediate chaos and then headed for the scene on foot, glad that she hadn't bothered to change out of her sneakers for the drive home. She left the cooler in her car—having managed to get some extra blood bags out of the supply room before running to the parking lot—and decided to check out the situation. She was right in believing speed to be essential, but still regretting having left those body bags behind. They would have been some form of protection for the vampires who'd survived.

If any had . . .

But she could still filch a few from the morgue wagons that were arriving, parked in the side streets like vultures waiting for the cooked carrion to cool. She raised a hand in greeting to one of the returning shift workers, Paul, then approached him.

"I guess we're on standby," he said, as she moved closer. "I just chatted with the chief—they want us to hang back until they get this under control."

Natalie turned to watch the firefighters attacking the front of the building, which was heavily obscured by thick smoke. "Or until they figure out what kind of body count they have, if any." She looked back at the two morgue wagons already on site. "Paul—do me a favor and cancel the rest of the recalls, at least until we find out what we're dealing with. I'm going to see what I can find out."

"Will do."

She paused for a moment, watching Paul return to the hearse-like station wagon they used to transport bodies. It was a shame, having so many people on hand who could help, if they knew what they were dealing with. But she couldn't take the chance. The knowledge of the existence of vampires was a dangerous thing, both for the vampires and the mortals who stumbled across their secrets.

Water had begun to pour from the hoses and the spray filtered into the air, making it seem moist and heavy. It brought a second's relief from the thick, acrid smell of the smoke, which grew worse as she approached the cluster of wagons and men.

A hand grasping her upper arm stopped her. Natalie turned to find herself faced by a black-coated fireman, streaks of soot marking his cheeks. "Sorry lady," he called, above the roar of the machinery and the fire consuming the building. "You've gotta get back—"

With her free hand, Natalie fumbled beneath her coat for her ID and produced it. "Coroner's office. We just got the call."

The man paused a brief moment, simply staring at her. For an instant she thought he wasn't going to believe her credentials, but then his features became set in a determined expression and he released her arm. "Over here."

She followed him to one side, where one of the smaller pumper trucks stood. Opening a compartment, he pulled out a helmet and black and yellow protective coat, saying, "You'd better wear these. Keep your people out of the way and don't go near the building till the chief gives us an 'all clear.' Can you handle first aid for our guys if the EMTs get over-loaded?"

"Some," she admitted, glancing back at her car. "I don't have that kind of equipment."

When she glanced back, his expression was grim. "No. I don't suppose you would. Let's hope we can get this thing contained quickly." He half-turned from her and raised his arm in response to a call from his left, then looked back at her again. "Eric Petrie. Arson."

"Natalie Lambert."

"Good to meet you, Dr. Lambert. Now stay out of the way." He started off toward the men who had hailed him, but Natalie ran after, catching his arm.

"Mr. Petrie?"

He stopped immediately, placing his hand on her arm and half-turning her away from the flames. "That's Eric. And I told you to stay out of the way."

She ignored the comment and gestured toward the fire, the heavy, rubberized coat making movement difficult. "Then it is arson?"

"I've seen signs of an accelerant. Clumsy, amateur job. Whoever wanted this to burn didn't take any chances—the building's going up like a torch." He released her arm and looked back toward the fire. "If there's anyone in there, you're gonna have your work cut out for you. No one could have survived this. No one."

When he left her this time, she didn't follow. Instead, Natalie swallowed hard and stared at the exterior of the building. How many of Nick's friends were in there? And if the fire had been deliberately set, had the arsonist known the vampires slept there? Could the arsonist be a vampire-hunter . . . or even a vampire?

There was no time for conjecture—she had to find the survivors. Shrugging herself into a better hold on the over-sized, protective gear she'd been given, Natalie headed around the side of the building to the alley. She remembered seeing a door there—if the vampires gotten out they'd have escaped in that direction, heading instinctively into the shadows of the alley and away from the dawn light they would have encountered at the front of the Raven.

Removing the hat, she worried at the band inside until the fit was better, then clasped it onto her head with one hand as she made her way around the building. She stayed well away from the efforts of the firefighters, who were making their way to the roof. They were punching holes through to let the heat escape before the building could blow up like a bomb and endanger the neighboring buildings.

Luckily, the alley was relatively quiet—it was small enough so that none of the trucks could get back here safely and the fire and fire-fighting efforts seemed to be concentrated at the front of the building. Standing ladders rested against the brick wall and, if she looked up, shading her eyes from the early sunlight, she could see the men on the cornice of the roof, plotting their attack on the burning building. There was no one to stop her as she slipped along the wall of the brick building the stood just a few hundred yards from the Raven—a warehouse, from what she'd gathered on her few trips to the bar.

Still looking upward and shading her eyes, Natalie was startled when hands wrapped around her mid-section and her mouth, dragging her into the darkness of the warehouse. She struggled against the smell of burned flesh and fear blossomed deep with her when she saw a flash of gold and fangs as the vampire turned her in his grasp—

It was the bartender at the Raven—she didn't know his name. Thankfully, he recognized her almost immediately. His eyes closed and his brow furrowed. When his eyes reopened, they were dark, almost mortal. But there was still a hint of gold within. The fangs disappeared and his hands dropped from her. "Dr.

... Lambert."

"Yes. Yes, I am." She couldn't place the accent. "I heard what happened and I came to help. How many got out?"

"How ... many?"

The light was dim and it took her eyes a moment to adjust, perhaps a bit longer as she realized that the few, high windows were being covered over or blocked. As he turned and gestured, she saw shadows amongst the crates, heard moaning and hissing and growling, as well as sobbing.

"I don't know." He shook his head as if to clear it and she saw more gold there. "There's been no time. Twelve, perhaps ... not that many."

Remembering the hand that had been pressed over her mouth, Natalie stepped toward him, reached out, then hesitated and met his eyes. "May I?"

Wordlessly, he held out his right hand. Natalie let it rest gently in her own. The skin was partially blackened, flaking in spots. He must be in pain, perhaps in shock. She'd been damned lucky he hadn't bitten her when he'd grabbed her. He must be in need of blood.

Looking up and past him, she saw that some of the shadows had moved closer. They *all* probably needed blood. Desperately. She couldn't count on her reputation as Nick's 'friend' to protect her from a room of wounded vampires.

His hand moved to her shoulder, resting there lightly. When Natalie met his eyes, he nodded toward the door. "It's not safe for you here. Go, now."

"I've got blood supplies in my car." She saw his nostrils flare at the word and heard a hiss sound throughout the warehouse, but forced herself to concentrate on him alone. "It's not much, but it's something. Were you able to grab anything before you left?"

"Two crates. They're mostly gone. Janette was going back to get more—" His gaze moved past her, to the light at the open doorway.

"Okay. Then I'll try to get what I can. Stay out of sight for now." Natalie reached for his uninjured left hand and gave it a light squeeze in encouragement. "You'll be fine, all of you. Oh—and if you broke down that door, you might want to get it back in place, try to lock it if you can, or block it off. The police will be here soon."

"The police." The vampire's dark eyes narrowed. "This was not an accident, then?"

"From what I've been told, no."

He nodded, accepting the information, then looked over his shoulder and into the darker reaches of the warehouse. "This woman is Natalie Lambert. You won't harm her. Anyone who tries will answer to me."

The answering hisses and cries from the darkness did nothing to reassure her, but the vampire clasped her hand tightly. "That should help you move among us. But be careful."

"Thank you—" She hesitated, suddenly realizing that she didn't know who he was.

There was a hesitation, a pause, as if he considered whether or not to give her his name. Natalie opened her lips, ready to tell him that it wasn't important, that she didn't need to know, but then he smiled. "Miklos," he answered. And he raised her hand to his lips with an elegant flourish, placing a light kiss on her knuckles before releasing her.

"Okay ... Miklos." Natalie cleared her throat and glanced around again, but the windows were quickly being covered and she could see almost nothing in the haze except rows of boxes and shifting shadows. "I'll be back."

Heading for the alley, Natalie stopped in the doorway as a thought struck her. "Miklos, would you tell Janette to keep those extra cases of blood aside for me? I'll have to set up a triage and treat the worst cases first."

His steps were slow and careful—he was definitely in shock from the pain of his injuries and she couldn't understand how he was still standing. Miklos walked to the edge of the shade in the doorway, but no further. The shadows made his face appear anguished. "I thought— Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. Janette went to fetch the extra blood but . . . she has not returned."

Natalie followed his gaze across the alley to the Raven, just in time to see the firefighters break through the roof of the building and watch a plume of angry yellow and orange flames shoot into the sky, surrounded by thick, black smoke.

CHAPTER FOUR

Each time he turned his head or shifted, the light shining through the windshield of the Caddie seemed to catch another small patch of unprotected skin. Nick growled and fought to retain control, each short, sharp burn bringing the vampire within closer to the surface. All of his senses screamed at him to find a dark place to hide, but he had no choice. He had to get down to the Raven.

Spotting Natalie's car, he pulled up beside it, his attempt at parking haphazard at best. He sat in his car, shielded by the shadow of the building across the street and tried to take in the scope of the mayhem.

There were lights and sirens everywhere he looked, the dark protective gear of the firemen a contrast to the bright reds and yellow and chrome of the engines. Police cars were beginning to arrive, as were more EMTs.

This was no place for a Homicide Detective—not until bodies were found. Only when the ashes had begun to cool would he and Schanke be called, to sift the remains of mortal flesh from inanimate object and to determine if the life that had ended so horribly was a result of an accident or murder most foul.

But he wasn't here as a Homicide Detective; he was here as a vampire. He had no idea how many of their fellows Janette had accorded shelter in the Raven. He had spent eight hundred years with Janette, off and on, and there were still things he didn't know about her or had never thought to ask. He'd learned quite a lot in this last year, though, and when he'd have once discounted such a thing as unthinkable, he now found her desire to care for others of their kind as something more than self-interest or a temporary and charming affectation. Nick understood that there were parts of her soul that he would never know, but was also beginning to realize that even she, dark and immutable Janette, was subject to change over time.

Distracting himself with his thoughts, Nick opened the Caddie door and slid out from beneath the protection of the car. His movement toward the wall, where the shadows were darkest, was instinctual. Even here he could feel the pressure of the sun's rays, but they didn't burn him. He was old enough to endure the faint tingling sensation of the heat on his skin even through his thick overcoat and clothing. Harder to fight was the blind terror that threatened to engulf him, but he reigned it in tightly and tried to keep it under control. Collar turned up to cover his neck, gloved hands clutched around his coat to keep it closed, he was about to attempt a foray into the light when he saw someone approaching.

It took him a moment to realize that the body inside the over-sized fireman's gear and the face beneath the protective helmet belonged to Natalie. She was running as quickly as possible in his direction, one hand hanging onto the helmet for dear life and another half-fighting and half-clutching the weight of the coat to her.

At first he thought that she'd seen him, but her vision was obscured by the helmet and she was intent on her car. Nick saw her go to the rear passenger door. She opened it and bent inside the car, as if removing something.

Her car was only partially shaded by the shadow of the building, but Nick made his way to her. Standing behind her, he said, "Let me get that."

"What? Nick—? Ow!" Natalie straightened so quickly she banged the back of her head on the interior of her car roof.

Nick reached out his hand to grab her as she swayed, catching her shoulder. He released her almost immediately when the tingling of his skin beneath the covering of the glove suddenly became more intense—she was just out of the shadows and standing in the full glow of the sunlight. He'd no sooner pulled his hand

back than Natalie all but leaped at him, pushing them both deeper into the shadows.

"Are you *insane*?" she asked angrily. "Do you want to go up in a puff of smoke or something?"

"It'd take a little longer than that. Not much, but a little longer." Nick smiled at her, suddenly realizing that he'd seen her in sunlight. The image lingered for a moment—her eyes bright and startled, the shine of her hair as the light picked out gold and copper threads among the darker brown.

But Natalie was staring at him, her anger dissipating. She looked over her shoulder, back toward the alley alongside the Raven and when she glanced at him again her expression was worried. "I've found some of them. Do you have any idea of how many vampires were staying at the Raven?"

"No." He let his gaze rise to the building beyond her. White smoke billowed out with the black, as water began quenching the flames. The club was quickly becoming a ruined and blackened monument. "Janette never said. And I never asked. It seemed better that way." Clearing his throat, he met her eyes again—and inwardly wished that she'd step back into the light so he could fix that impression of her on his memory. "How many are left?"

"Miklos said twelve, but he's not sure. They haven't gotten a count. A lot of them are burned."

"How badly?"

"I don't know. It wasn't safe enough for me to get in to take a look." She gestured over her shoulder. "I've got blood in the car, but it won't be enough. I think I can con some supplies out of a few EMTs, but I don't know how much we can get without them asking too many questions."

Nick nodded, looking toward the paramedic units, who seemed busy with treating a number of firefighters for smoke inhalation and assorted injuries. "I think I can take care of that."

There was the faintest disapproval in her expression and she looked away. There were times when his powers of hypnotism came in handy, but Natalie didn't entirely approve of his use of it. It could have been the fact that he was trying to get rid of the vampire and become mortal—and that using the vampire even for the best ends could be considered a set-back. Then again, her objections had gotten even more vehement after the events of last Valentine's Day

Grasping her upper arm, he said softly, "Where are they?"

Natalie met his eyes, then gestured back toward the alley. "They're hiding in the warehouse across the way. I want to get this blood to them as soon as possible."

"Then let's go."

He'd moved no more than a step before Natalie had grabbed his arm tightly and hauled him back into the shadows. "Are you kidding? You'll burn to a crisp out there!"

"Not if I run." He smiled, touched by the concern in her expression and brushed her cheek lightly with the back of his hand. "I'll be fine. But you should stay here."

"And you're gonna handle all of those injuries?"

"I've been a doctor before—"

"We don't have enough blood, which means we're going to have to prioritize treatment. And we don't have time to argue about how recent your credentials are."

There was a set to her jaw that meant Natalie would not be moved by heaven, hell, or vampire. His smile fading, Nick touched her cheek again and relented. "All right. But stay close to me. There's nothing more dangerous than a wounded vampire."

"A healthy one isn't much of a prize, either," she grumbled. Reaching up, she took her helmet and handed it to him.

Nick stared at it. "What's this for?"

"Your head." When he raised his hand to his hat, she began shrugging out of the heavy, rubberized coat. "This is a hell of a lot better protection than what you're wearing. In your case, every little bit helps."

"You may be right." Discarding his hat, Nick placed the helmet on his head, then added the fireman's coat over his own. The weight settled on him easily and even if the fit wasn't quite comfortable over all of his clothing, it was at least comforting. "Now let me get that cooler."

"I'll carry the cooler," said Natalie. "You just get down there and get things squared away. I'll catch up."

It astounded him, the way she fell into these things. She had no reason for being here, no connection to these vampires, and yet she was willing to risk death and worse to help them. He stared at her for a moment, smiling.

"What?" She wrinkled her nose at him. "Nick, there's no time—"

"You're right. There's no time now. Later." With that, he leaned down to give her a quick peck on the cheek and stole some of her courage to help him across the street and into the light of the alley.

Nick almost stopped when he left the dark edge of shadow and passed into the brightness of the post-dawn world. Almost, but the fear within him made him run. He sprinted at a mortal rate, his vampire speed denied him under the brightness of the sun, the weight of the fireman's gear negligible. For a few seconds he felt the added protection it gave him, but the sunlight beat down upon and around him relentlessly. This was a time for sleeping, not for running, and his body let him know it considered his action a betrayal as he found himself shivering. His heart pumped and his mouth went dry as he raced the sun, already beginning to smell the tendrils of smoke that rose each time the light caught an unprotected patch of skin on his face or neck or wrist.

And then there was the door ahead—cold steel. It moved aside just before he hit it, revealing darkness. As it was, he stumbled and rolled across the floor, stopping only when he slammed into a number of wooden and cardboard crates and boxes. Nick lay on the cold concrete floor of the warehouse, dazed, his muscles finally relaxing as the darkness surrounded him.

The seconds of sprinting through the sunlight had seemed a lifetime and he'd had enough of those to know what one felt like. Hearing the sounds of movement closing in on him, he rolled flat onto his back and sat up, then took a hand offered to him and rose to his feet.

"You're here?" Miklos asked in wonder. "But it's daylight! How—?"

The steel door was being closed, but Nick walked over to the vampire there and placed a hand lightly on her shoulder. "Natalie's coming," he told her. "Leave it open."

The female vampire wasn't familiar to him. She looked at him with wide, brown eyes, then turned away, melting into the shadows. There was something in her gaze that unnerved him—was it pity? He turned to move after her, but heard Natalie in the alley just outside the door.

She staggered under the weight of the cooler. "Heavier than I thought," she grunted as she crossed into the shadow of the doorway.

Almost immediately it was taken from her and set to one side, as if by invisible hands. She started and moved closed to Nick, still staring around her into the darkness.

He slipped an arm around her waist, not only to comfort her but to warn the others off. No matter how desperately they needed blood to heal, he'd do well to remind them that he was healthy enough to break any of them in half if they touched her.

When Natalie shivered beneath his arm, he pulled her closer beside him. She whispered, "The building's still burning. My people are standing by until they get the word to go in. And I caught a paramedic on my way back—he's on his way with a full kit. I told him I thought we might have a wounded animal in here." When his eyes widened, she added, "Well, I didn't want to chance us being overheard. Someone's going to be less interested in tracking us down if we're treating an animal."

"Right." There wasn't time to marvel at her quick thinking. Nick let his gaze wander through the shadows, picking out faces amongst the boxes and crates. "Miklos, how are you doing?"

"Better than most. My hand—"

"He's in shock," said Natalie sharply. Slipping out from beneath Nick's protective hold, she stepped across to Miklos and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'll need you to sit over there so I can take a look at this." She half-turned and shrugged at Nick. "Guess you're going to have to take charge. I'm going to need some room here, so you'd better clear a couple of boxes away. I need to know how many are here and how badly they're hurt. I'll need blankets, water—if there's a tap in this place. And some light."

Nick looked toward the doorway and grimaced, knowing what she meant—Natalie couldn't see in the dark. They'd need light for her to work, but not too much or it might draw outside attention. "Let me see what I can find around here. We've gotta keep an eye out for that EMT, too." Nick removed the firefighter's helmet and ran his hand through his hair, then was startled to find his scalp was still warm from his brief run in the sunlight. There was no way he was leaving this place until sunset if he could help it. Nor did he look forward to trying to coax a group of wounded vampires into action. "Miklos—where's Janette? The others will listen to her."

Miklos turned startled eyes to Natalie. "You didn't tell him—?"

Natalie ducked her head, suddenly busy with the catch on the cooler and the medical bag that rested on top of it. Silence fell . . . a sudden lack of sound so oppressive that it frightened him.

Once again Nick smelled smoke, but this time he wasn't dreaming. Only remnants of now drifted through the doorway; the prevailing winds were driving the heavy black smoke and ash from the burning Raven in another direction.

"Tell me what?" he asked, although somewhere deep within his heart he knew the answer. He needed only to meet Miklos' eyes and stared into that dark, saddened gaze a moment before Miklos turned away from him.

Janette.

The dream had not been a dream. He'd been burning, because she'd been burning. The wreckage of the Raven had fallen down around her, trapping her. She'd surrendered herself to the flames, despaired of ever getting out—

"Janette."

Nick ran to the door, his fear of the sunlight blotting out everything except his need to find Janette, to get to her in time and save her. The sunlight burned, clawing at him. Nick's eyes closed and he threw his hands up to shield his face, stumbling into the alley. Flesh smoking, he fell to his hands and knees, then crawled toward what was left of the Raven.

Until other hands grabbed him, dragging him back into the darkness.

He fought his rescuers for a moment, then let his hands fall to his sides. Natalie called his name, but he turned his face from her and huddled on the floor, pulling in upon himself as if to find some place in his soul that wasn't seared by this revelation.

"She's gone," said Natalie softly, her arm around his shoulders. "There's nothing you can do. Nothing you could have done. Nick, I'm sorry. I'm so, so very sorry . . ."

The threads that had connected them had fallen silent. There was no sense of Janette, no sound, nor word, nor feeling of her. Just a numbness remained, a cold, stone wall in his mind and heart. Janette was no longer there.

It seemed the impossible had happened. Janette had always been there. Even when he couldn't reach her there had at least been a sense of her, out in the world somewhere but still connected to him. It was because of who they were—both children of LaCroix. LaCroix had brought them together. LaCroix had made them what they were.

"And what reason can you give for not allowing me to travel to London?"

LaCroix had stood by the fireplace, his expression blank, controlled. One hand rested on the red silk of his cravat, the elegant line of his jacket and his slacks unruffled by their argument. "None. Because I need not answer to anyone, especially not you, Nicholas."

The answer enraged Nicholas. LaCroix would best him always. As they'd argued, he'd been leafing through the shelves of books. He flung the book in his hand angrily across the room.

Only then did LaCroix move—to pick up the book from the floor. He opened it as he straightened and turned the pages, his fingers running down the words as he read. "Does Plutarch vex you, then?"

"*You vex me.*" Exhausted, knowing that there was no escape, Nicholas drew a wing-backed chair to himself and slid over the arm and into the seat. He stared into the flames of the fire, refusing to meet LaCroix's gaze. "The channel is clear. The French have commerce with England again. Our finances are good—give me one reason that I shouldn't go."

"You won't go because I tell you that you won't. That should be reason enough." LaCroix walked over to him and tossed the book at him. "Find your consolation in Plutarch. There's a fine chapter in there on obedience. Take the lesson to heart and you'll find me less 'vexing'."

Nicholas opened his mouth to answer, fingers gripping the edge of the book and wholly prepared to fling it directly at LaCroix this time, when the door to the salon opened. Janette paused in the doorway—or posed, rather, for she was always careful when making an entrance and knew how best to show off her various achievements. "Don't tell me I'm returning to another argument?"

LaCroix strode to her side and took her hand, kissing it lightly. "Since you ask, I'll ignore that topic. Nor, Nicholas, should you mention it." He stood back to admire her dress. "What a vision you are. We didn't expect you back so soon."

"The winds were in our favor. Although the crossing was far from pleasant." She swung her hand in his for a moment, then released him and walked to Nicholas' chair. "Must you brood all the time, Nicola?"

"Never in your presence." He dropped the book into the chair, rose and took her in his arms, hugging her. Her presence had dispelled the immediate tension in the room and he ignored his anger with LaCroix for the moment, on her behalf. Kissing her cheek, he whispered, "Have you brought what I asked?"

Her lips nuzzled his neck, but her whisper reached his ear. "Your friend Angelo is still something of a mystery to me. But, yes, I have the package he sent for you." Then she pulled back from him, smiling brightly. "I have missed you, both of you. Three months has been an eternity."

"For us all," said LaCroix. He stood behind another chair, his fingers resting at the very top of the back. "You must be exhausted after your journey."

"Yes," admitted Janette, with a short sigh. "But I wanted to see you both before I unpacked. I have gifts for you. And—" she turned to LaCroix, "the letters of exchange you asked for."

"I'll look forward to seeing them and you . . . at dinner."

Janette's eyes narrowed slightly—Nicholas saw the questioning glance at LaCroix that disappeared almost as quickly as it formed. But then she was smiling again. "Ah yes, I could do with a good meal—the blood abroad is thin in places. Not like Paris. I shall see you both at dinner, after I unpack."

She swept out of the room as quickly as she'd entered. For a moment Nicholas gazed after her, wondering at her abrupt dismissal—and she *had* been dismissed by LaCroix, without question. There'd been nothing overt about it, nothing threatening, but Janette bowed to LaCroix's intimated will without question.

"Close your mouth, Nicholas. Unless you're trying to catch flies. There are far too many flies in Paris this summer, wouldn't you agree?"

But Nicholas was not going to be swept aside so easily. He stalked across the room until he faced LaCroix. "Janette can go where she wishes without question?"

"Janette?" LaCroix raised an eyebrow and glanced over his shoulder at the door. "Of course she can."

"And I can't?"

LaCroix smiled absently, but his gaze remained fixed on the door, as if considering some matter of import. "That hardly requires an answer."

"Why?"

Pushing past him, LaCroix seated himself in the chair he'd stood behind previously. He crossed his legs and turned his attention toward cleaning off the heel of his boot. "I should think that would be obvious. Janette knows her place. You have not yet learned yours."

"What? To be at your beck and call? To trail after you, like a lapdog at your heels?" he sneered.

LaCroix raised his eyes to Nicholas, his foot falling to the floor and the heel thudding even through the carpeting. "Yes. Or no, as I command. Because the point, Nicholas, is that you will do as I will. It's your destiny. The sooner you resign yourself to your fate—"

"Fate? Captivity, you mean," supplied Nicholas. He crossed the room to the doors, anger flooding through him. It took an effort not to smash them with his fists . . . but he wouldn't give LaCroix the satisfaction.

"Janette doesn't find it so."

"Janette . . . is afraid of you." He leaned his arm against the door and his head beneath it. "She doesn't dare to contradict you."

"You mistake her fear for acceptance. As I said, she knows her place. She'll never leave without my permission."

"And what if she would?" Nicholas raised his head to look at LaCroix, turning so that his back was flat against the door. "What if Janette left *without* your permission?"

LaCroix's eyes narrowed and he looked down at the floor. "You have something in mind."

"Yes." Nicholas crossed the room, pausing at LaCroix's chair. Holding onto the winged back, he leaned forward. "What if I could convince Janette to leave with me? To leave without your consent?"

Leaning back in the chair, LaCroix looked up at him. "She wouldn't."

"But what if she *did*? Do you trust her 'obedience' that much?"

The gray-blue eyes that met his gaze chilled him, but Nicholas stood firm. After what seemed hours, LaCroix nodded ever so slightly. "Yes, I do. It might do you well to learn how she honors her ties to me. All right, Nicholas, I give you leave to try. Convince Janette to leave Paris with you in . . . say, a fortnight? And you may go to London or where ever else you wish. I won't stop you. In fact, I'll never see you again, if that's your will."

His sudden elation was stilled by the thought that he was being deceived. LaCroix never entered into a bargain without believing he had the upper hand. "No tricks," asked Nicholas carefully.

"I'll stand by your words. You must convince Janette to leave with you—letting her know that it's against my will—and I'll be quit of you. And she's to know nothing of this agreement between us. Will that satisfy you?"

"Yes." Nick moved to his chair and picked up the book he'd left there. On his way out of the room, he paused only to thrust it into LaCroix's hands. "Perhaps it would do *you* well to read Plutarch's chapter on obedience."

LaCroix took the book, smiling coldly. "You may be right. Although I know I'll not be disappointed by Janette. She will *never* leave me, unless I will it."

So many years ago, that had been. And now LaCroix was proven wrong. Janette was gone. Janette was no longer here.

But others *were* here. Those Janette had cared for needed his help. He couldn't abandon them this easily. He would have helped them for himself, but now he would help them on her behalf, in her memory.

Nick went still for a moment, opening his eyes. With the back of his hand, he wiped the tears from his cheeks. Not now. There wasn't time for it now. Later.

Always later.

"Nick?"

Natalie's hand was warm on the back on his neck, a comforting warmth as the sunlight could never be. He pushed himself up from the ground, resting on his knees. She was kneeling on the ground beside him, eyes wide, tears on her own cheeks. In response, he pulled her into his arms, hugged her tightly, and closed his eyes again. A minute more—they could give him that much. Holding Natalie against his chest, he let his grief for Janette's passing settle deep within his heart.

CHAPTER FIVE

She hadn't know what to do at first, except to hold him. It wasn't anything he said and even less than what he did that let her know deeply Janette's loss had struck him—his expression, as usual, told her everything. There was something shattered within Nick that scared her, a grief so great that he couldn't quite contain it. Even though she'd spent little enough time with Janette and not all of it under pleasant circumstances, they'd helped one another. Nick was the tie that bound them together. Janette had been sister, lover, confident to him, all together or at different times throughout his life. The closest Natalie could come to understanding was the grief she'd felt when Richard had been killed, and then killed again.

So she held him tightly, stroking his hair, not wanting to give way to soothing words that were meaningless in such a circumstance. Eventually, it was the world around him that seemed to bring him back to himself. He started at a cry of pain from the deepest recesses of the warehouse, drawing back from her and meeting her eyes.

Natalie reached out her hand to cup his cheek, which was red in reaction to his brief bout with the sunlight. "They need you now," was all she could think to say.

He took her hand from his cheek, planted a kiss in her palm, then struggled to his feet. Nick offered her his hand up and she took it, squeezing it after she rose, just to let him know that she was still there and that she understood.

There was a sudden shadow at the door. The vampires who had been drawn out of their own suffering and hiding places by Nick's loss disappeared into the shows suddenly. Natalie turned to find herself faced with an EMT worker. He was disheveled, his face streaked with the remnants of soot and sweat. But it was the bag over his arm that interested her, specifically the bandages and tools it contained.

"Dr. Lambert?" The man blinked, peering into the darkness. "Most of the fire is out and we've gotten a break. I thought I'd help you with that dog, now."

Nick walked toward him. "Thanks. We could certainly use your help."

"Sure thing. I brought what I thought you could—" The man hesitated as he glanced down the open front of the fireman's coat Nick was wearing. "You're not from one of the regular units, are you?"

"Metro Homicide," said Nick, placing a hand on the man's shoulder and drawing him to one side. "I'm here to help out. We got a tip it might be arson." He glanced over at Natalie, then turned back, his gaze locked on the paramedic's eyes. "We've got some wounded people here, but we've gotta keep this quiet."

"Keep it quiet," echoed the man, staring blankly.

Natalie felt her stomach twist in knots and turned her back to Nick. She clasped her hands together and frowned—she hated when he did that. Yes, they needed help right now, but to just take over someone's mind and memories was just a bit too invasive for her liking.

"We'll need all the extra blood supplies you have on the EMT vans. Bring them here. If anyone asks, you're working with Dr. Lambert, the county coroner. They can check with her later. And we need you to hurry, all right?"

"Need to hurry"

Catching sight of Miklos, she returned to him and pressed lightly on his shoulder to make him sit down on the packing crate again. "Let me see you hand," she said softly, kneeling beside the crate.

Miklos placed his hand in her own. "This isn't so bad," she whispered. "I'll just clean off some of the

burned skin. Once you have blood, you'll be fine."

"There are others—much worse—"

"They'll get blood first," she promised, smiling up at his dour expression. But her smile faded as she touched the back of her hand to his cheek. "I'll see if Nick can't find some blankets or something for you. You people don't go into shock, do you? Because you're damned close on a human scale."

"I'll be fine. The others—"

"I'll take care of them. I promise."

This time, he returned her smile. Natalie rose to her feet and touched his shoulder gently as she moved past him, but he caught her wrist with his good hand, holding her there.

She froze instantly, although his grip wasn't too tight. It was just enough to stop her. She had the feeling that if he'd wanted, she wouldn't have been able to get away from him without breaking her wrist.

"He does . . . what he needs to do," said Miklos, nodding toward Nick, who was still hypnotizing the paramedic. "It's what he is. It's what we all are."

Half-turning, Natalie watched the dazed paramedic drop his kit to the cement floor as if in a dream, then turn and walk out into the sunlight. Once outside he seemed to awaken and headed off at a run, unknowingly obeying Nick's orders.

"I know," she answered. "But it doesn't make it right."

By the time Nick had picked up the paramedic's kit and started walked toward her, the steel door had begun to close. Miklos released his hold on her and Natalie felt a brief stab of panic as the last of the light disappeared, enveloping her in near-silent darkness.

She jumped when she felt Nick's hand on her shoulder. "Nat?"

"Sorry," she answered shakily. "But I'm pretty much in the dark right now."

"Oh—damn. Hang on. If we're lucky, there's a flashlight in here."

Deciding to stay right where she was, Natalie waited, letting her eyes adjust as she heard Nick rummage through the paramedic's bag. The sudden circular beam almost blinded her when it was flicked on and she grabbed at it like a lifeline. "Thanks. It'll be nice to see what I'm doing. Now, if you could just get that cooler for me, I'm going to have to take a look at everybody before we decided where the blood goes."

"You're the doctor."

The work had been slow, but steady. With Nick or Miklos beside her, Natalie had treated also twenty vampires with injuries ranging from abrasions and contusions acquired during the near-panicked dash from the flames and their own fear to at least one vampire who was so severely burned that neither Nick nor Miklos would let her approach him until the vampire had downed three pints of blood and had begun to heal. She took a break after the more serious cases had been cared for and left the warehouse, knowing that at least an hour had passed and she had to put in an appearance with the Coroner's Office personnel or she'd be missed.

The little time she'd passed treating the vampires had meant a world of difference at the scene of the fire—several of the engines were gone and it looked like the flames were out, although one pumper was still spraying the roof of the Raven with water. Having remembered to re-appropriate the fireman's gear from Nick, Natalie walked to the rear of the trucks and found the arson investigator, Eric Petrie, deep in conversation with a member of the police's arson squad. She nodded at the officer, not remembering his name, but he merely returned the nod and walked off—obviously, their conversation was done.

Petrie turned off the walkie-talkie on his hip and smiled as Natalie handed back the helmet and coat. "Dr. Lambert—your people were just looking for you. We've done a preliminary walk through of the rubble and it looks clear, no sign of bodies . . . just a lot of ash and soot."

Ash and soot. Natalie turned toward the building, the brick front blackened by flame. That's all that would be left of a vampire, wouldn't it, if vampire remains from fire were similar to what happened to them

in sunlight. She remembered Richard, caught by that beam of light, going up in a flash. There'd been nothing left of him.

Just like there'd be nothing left of Janette . . .

"Dr. Lambert—?"

She forced an embarrassed smile in Petrie's direction. "Sorry—I haven't been off shift since yesterday afternoon. What was that?"

"I think your people can spare you." Petrie opened a compartment in the engine they were near and replaced the helmet and coat he'd loaned her. "We'd withdrawn the call for your wagons; now we're on standby in case we find someone in the basement. The building plans indicate there was a residential permit for part of the building."

"I'll tell my people to call it a night, then," said Natalie, glancing back at the Raven. "Or . . . a morning, I guess. I doubt you'll find anything."

"You know this place?" asked Petrie. He followed her glance to the building. "Some kind of dance club, right?"

"Yes. I guess." Natalie found some part of herself bristling as his appraising stare. "What? Am I too old for dance clubs?"

"No, you just don't seem the type." Petrie shrugged. "No offense meant."

"None taken. And I've only been there a few times—a . . . friend of mine has some friends there." She liked the way Petrie nodded, as if he understood completely, which he obviously didn't. Grinning, she shook her head. "I mean, with the hours I keep, who has time for clubs? Or the energy."

"Tell me about it." Petrie matched the grin, then sobered as a group of firefighters passed, one raising a hand to him in recognition. He waved back, saying, "I'm going take another walk-through with the police team—but I think we'll have this scene closed in another hour or so. Like I guessed, it's pretty cut and dried."

"Then it *was* arson?" asked Natalie hesitantly.

Petrie pushed the fire helmet back on his head and wiped his forehead with his gloved hand, leaving a trail of soot across his skin and brushing away the hair that sweat had plastered to his face. "We've got definite signs of accelerant outside and just inside the front door—looks like our friend broke in, splashed some gasoline around, lit it, and then high-tailed it out of there. Yeah, it's arson and it's an amateur job." Petrie sighed. "Cases like these it's either a disgruntled patron or an owner or investor who's way over his head in bills. One way or another, we'll get to the bottom of it. Too bad we don't have any witnesses."

"That would make a difference."

"It might. We need to find the owner and the staff, any of the regulars to get a feel for what might have happened last night. Somebody making problems, somebody out for revenge?"

Natalie swallowed, knowing that those witnesses were available—*more* than available. They were just around the corner, healing. It was standard police work, interview all the witnesses at a scene. It just so happened that these witnesses were vampires. They couldn't be brought down to the station and interviewed in broad daylight because they'd burn to a crisp in transit. Nor could any of them afford to have their lives or backgrounds investigated.

At any other time, she would have assumed that Nick would take care of this. He'd be in there right now, talking to the vampires, getting information from them that he'd turn over to the arson investigators from a 'reliable source' or something.

But Janette's death had shaken him. He'd been quiet when they'd moved from vampire to vampire, lost in his own thoughts to a point where she'd had to ask him three or four times to hand her this or that. Occasionally she'd see him look up at her, watching her with haunted eyes.

No, she couldn't count on Nick to think about this by himself. She'd remind him. And maybe she'd ask

Miklos. He knew these vampires and they knew him. She'd noticed a number of the vampires were standoffish or openly antagonistic to Nick. Miklos might get information that Nick would never be given.

Petrie was looking at her, as if waiting for an answer. Natalie cleared her throat and glanced away. "I'm sorry—I was thinking about what our shift coverage was going to be like today. You asked—?"

"Did they all get out?"

Natalie stared at him, not understanding. "Who?"

"The vampires."

A cold chill went down her spine and she met Petrie's gaze evenly. Natalie forced a short laugh. "I'm sorry—I *really* must be out of it. I thought you just said—"

He smiled and wiped his hand across his forehead ahead, spreading the streak of soot. "I haven't slept in twenty-four hours. You're not the only one who's slipping gears." He looked away, toward the firemen packing up the tanker trucks. "Look, if you hear anything from anyone, let me know, okay? This guy's an amateur, but the pros gotta start somewhere. The last thing this city needs is a new firebug."

"I'll second that." Natalie waited until he met her gaze again. She was proud of the fact that her hand wasn't twitching nervously as she shook his hand. "Thanks for the help, Mr. Petrie."

"Eric," he corrected. "And what I said—you'll let me know?"

He wasn't pressing the issue. Natalie gave him a noncommittal smile. "Yeah. If I find anything, I'll ring your office."

"Thanks."

Natalie pointedly made her way to the wagons from the coroner's office, guessing that he might be watching her. There was no way she was going to let him know how badly his comments had shaken her . . . or let him see her make her way back to the warehouse, where Nick and the other vampires were hiding from the sunlight.

The attendants and coroner's office personnel were already standing down and packing up when she arrived. Paul was about to slip into the coroner's wagon when he saw her. He hesitated and smiled as she approached. "Looks like it's a good one, huh?"

"Looks like it," said Natalie, trying to appear a little less grim. Paul didn't know that Janette was missing and presumed destroyed. And, to save the secrets of the vampires, probably would never know if there were any non-mortal casualties this morning. "Could you log me out when you get back? I'm heading home from here."

"Sure thing, Dr. Lambert." Paul looked up at the building. "You know, we were getting worried when we didn't see you for a while. But then I remembered . . . how you feel about fire?"

Natalie bit her lip and met his eyes squarely. She wasn't aware that her 'feelings' about burn victims was common knowledge at the coroner's office nor was she comfortable with the notion. "That doesn't mean I can't do the job."

"I know. We know. But we wanted you to know that if you need some time out on one of these and we're on duty, we'll spell you." Paul nodded, as if trying to tell her that he really meant what he said. "Hey, with me it's floaters. I can't deal with 'em. So if you need some help on one of these, you let us know."

Natalie smiled broadly, touched by the gesture. "Thanks. But I can do it. It's part of the job."

"Yeah. Lousy part of it, too." Paul matched her grin and slid into the car. "Go home, Dr. Lambert," he called, before closing the door. "And sleep 'till Friday."

"Don't I wish!"

Natalie waited for a moment and watched the cars pull out into traffic and away. Grace would be leaving soon, if she hadn't left already. And now it was the day shift's turn to handle the mortal remains of the citizens of Toronto.

She, unfortunately, still had some immortal remains to deal with . . .

Eric Petrie—was he an inspector or an officer? She'd never thought to ask—was no where in sight. But Natalie still was *very* careful as she made her way behind the Raven, down the alley, and to the warehouse where the vampires were hiding.

The doorway to the warehouse looked sturdy and locked, although she could see ruptures in the metal where it had been warped and twisted into place. After a glance over her shoulder to make certain she hadn't been followed, Natalie tapped lightly on the metal.

She jumped as it boomed beneath even her lightest touch. After a second, she heard a scraping noise and the door opened inward, into darkness, only the barest gleam of tell-tale golden eyes indicating that there was a vampire on guard.

At first she didn't know what to do—it wasn't like there was a password or anything. The faint hiss of annoyance from the darkness wasn't at all inviting . . . but Natalie scooted into the building quickly, her heart sinking as the door closed quickly behind her, sealing out the daylight and leaving her in darkness.

But only for a second. She saw the beam of the flashlight as Nick approached. He handed it to her and grasped her arm, drawing her to one side. "What's the situation?" he asked softly.

"They haven't found anyone or anything. No remains."

"There wouldn't be—"

"I know," said Natalie quickly. Placing her free hand over his, she squeezed it and lowered the flashlight beam to the floor. Her eyes were adjusting to the darkness, but she could see the lines etched into Nick's face. "They've got the fire out; they've sent my people home. There's one EMT remaining to cover the clean-up crew, but they'll be gone in a little while."

"And then the police will move in," said Nick. His tone was grim, almost angry. He met her eyes for a second, then let out a hiss of air between his teeth. "I think I'll join them."

"They've punched a hole through part of the roof. You don't know what—"

"It's a building. I'll have plenty of cover. And . . . it's closer to the Caddie. I'm less likely to burst into flames trying to get out of here."

Natalie couldn't argue with that. She squeezed his hand again, just to get his attention, then waited for him to actually meet her gaze. "Stay inside until sunset. Call in sick tonight."

"We've got a—"

"Call in," she repeated firmly. "Don't push yourself or put yourself in danger, all right? For me?"

His expression softened at the last bit and he covered her hand with his. "I promise not to do anything crazy."

"Or crazier than you usually do," she amended for him. Natalie looked around the interior of the warehouse, but she could still see little more than shadows and she felt that playing the flashlight over her surroundings at wounded and half-healed hungry vampires would be more than just rude . . . it could be downright dangerous. "What about the EMT? Did he come up with anything before he left?"

"Some plasma. It helped. Once the sun sets we'll be in a better position to move some of the bad cases." She heard Nick take a deep breath. "He won't remember a thing. I gave him a memory of loaning the plasma to another unit, but not remembering what one. He'll find some way to cover the discrepancy in the records."

Suppressing a shiver, Natalie stared out into the darkness. She hated when Nick did things like that, tampering with other people's minds. At one time she'd thought it was a very handy talent . . . but it's something else entirely when you've had it used on you.

"Nat?"

"I'm okay. It's just—" She grappled for a moment with an excuse. "It's just . . . fire. You know?"

Nick's arm went around her shoulder and she felt guilty for a moment, having stirred his empathy under

false pretenses. He knew her fear of fire or, rather, what fire did to a human body, and shared it to a certain extent. Fire was the mortal enemy of the vampire. Although he'd never had to pry open the blackened, flaking fingers of a corpse and have them snap off in his hand—

Another shudder ran through her and his grip around her shoulder tightened, but she didn't feel quite so guilty this time. Then, she swallowed, "We *may* have a problem."

"Another one?"

There was a forced lightness to his tone that both cheered and dismayed her and his arm fell from her shoulders as he took a step away, into the darkness. She could only begin to imagine the pain he had inside, having to deal with Janette's loss and yet not deal with it. But if his sense of humor was intact, that was a good sign.

"They're cheaper by the dozen," she replied. Then, Natalie sobered and met his gaze again. "The arson investigator—Eric Petrie? He said that it's almost definitely arson. He wanted to know if there were any witnesses. He thought there might have been a fight at the club, an argument—"

Nick nodded thoughtfully. "I'll have Miklos ask around. Although if anything had happened, he'd know about it. He tries to keep an eye on the mortals."

"You're blaming mortals pretty quickly."

"This isn't a vampire's style. Too high profile. Too much collateral damage. Too many innocent bystanders to explain to police."

"So it probably wasn't a vampire with a grudge against . . . the Raven." Natalie bit her tongue at the last minute, substituting the club's name for Janette.

Nick looked away; she could see his lips tighten in a grim smile, in acknowledgment of her attempt at delicacy. "No. Probably not."

In a way, she thought, that must make it worse. If Janette had been destroyed by someone who'd wanted to get back at another mortal, or the club in general for something that had happened there, without knowing that he'd endangered vampires—

Vampires. Eric Petrie had mentioned vampires.

Natalie swallowed. "Nick? That problem I'd mentioned—?" She waited until he turned to look down at her again. "Petrie, the arson investigator, he asked me if they all got out. If the *vampires* had all gotten out."

Whatever lightness, forced or not, had been in Nick's tone, it was gone instantly. "Petrie," he repeated, frowning. "I don't know him. You?"

Natalie shrugged. "Just met him today. But he seems to know about the vampires at the Raven. And he thought I knew something about them."

Nick started. "You didn't—?"

"No, I didn't say anything," she returned, in a harsh whisper. "I looked at him like he was crazy. And he backed off. In a hurry."

"Good. Good." Nick looked away. "I'll look into it, see if anyone knows anything about him. And you—" He turned toward her and she saw a slight smile. Nick reached out his hand and touched her cheek. "You look exhausted."

"Thanks for the compliment." She let his fingers rest against her face for a moment, then shook her head when he drew them back. "But I'm okay. I might be able to do something more here. Change bandages or something. And I should take a run by the hospital blood donation center—they toss out half and quarter donations. I usually grab them for comparison studies. If your friends aren't too fussy about mixing blood types—"

Nick's hands moved to her shoulders and he gave each one a gentle squeeze. "Go *home*," he said, that smile still in place. "They'll be fine—Miklos and I can take it from here and right now there's nothing we can

do until the sun sets. You've done enough. *More* than enough."

Looking past him, into the darkness, she could swear she saw a number of golden eyes shining from the shadows . . . and a couple of red sets, as well. The sight of the red eyes sent a slight shiver through her and she swallowed, then met Nick's gaze with what she hoped was a stern expression. "Only if you're *sure*—"

"I'm sure. I've never been *so* sure of anything in my entire life." He placed his arm around her shoulders and turned her toward the doorway. "C'mon, I'll walk you out."

"I don't know. Eight hundred years is an awfully long time . . ."

He grimaced at her teasing tone. "Not *that* long."

"Long enough." Natalie paused at the door and looked back at him, suddenly serious. "You have your cell phone? You'll call if you need anything?"

"I have it. And I'll call. But we won't need anything."

"You need blood," she said sharply.

Nick's expression was just as determined. "They'll do without, until sunset." Then his expression softened. "Nat—go home. There's nothing more you can do here and the longer you stay . . . I need to know that you're safe."

Eyes shown in the darkness behind him and Nat suppressed another shiver, knowing what Nick had almost said—he wasn't certain that he could protect her for much longer in a small space filled with wounded, hungry vampires. Maybe leaving *was* a good idea . . .

"You won't go into work tonight?"

Nick raised his hand in the air. "Promise."

"All right. I'll . . . I'll see you later."

"Yeah."

There was a moment of awkwardness between them. Nick raised his hand to her cheek again and, just for a second, she thought that he might kiss her—

But she was suddenly aware of a screech of metal as unseen hands pulled back the door behind her, isolating her in a pool of light that shone in from the door. The hand that had caressed her cheek rose to protect Nick's eyes and she heard him hiss, startled, as he turned instinctively from the light.

That was it. That was what kept them apart. The light.

Turning on her heel and deciding that she most definitely had to get the name, rank, and serial number of the vampire who'd chosen just that moment to open the door, Natalie decided that maybe, just maybe, she'd have to do something about this whole light business.

CHAPTER SIX

Every inch of the distance that had separated the Raven's side entrance from the warehouse door had seemed like a hundred miles. Panting, Nick stood just inside the askew loading door of the Raven, back flat against the wall, and reveled in the darkness.

The smell of singed flesh clung to him, despite the coat he'd thrown over his head and the gloves that covered his hands. He let his head rest against the wall and looked up, not quite seeing, just letting his racing heart return to a normal rhythm, fighting the fear that had flooded through him and nearly incapacitated him as he'd made that short, eternal dash across the alley and into the burned building.

He had no heart for this. He knew it. But he had to be here. Just as he had to steel himself to speak with each and every vampire in that warehouse about the events of the night before.

It hadn't been easy. Some of them Nick knew, others he didn't, but most of them knew of him and many weren't shy about their feelings. He'd been faced with outright contempt or challenge—especially from a few of the young bucks—derision, and even sympathy.

The sympathy was the worst.

Sometimes it was sympathy for what he sought to find, the redemption that more intuitive knew that he sought in his quest for mortality. And sometimes the sympathy was for his loss. For the passing of Janette.

Miklos had remained by him throughout his informal interrogations, snarling to keep the more fractious members of the group in line and within the bounds of courtesy or at least tolerance, or standing silent and stoic as they mentioned Janette, asked what was known and what could be done. In fact, Miklos was something of a puzzle. He knew very little of him, knew that Janette had trusted him and that had always been enough.

More than enough.

His interrogations over, he was following police procedure and investigating the scene of the crime. It was all perfectly legal and legitimate. Well, it *was* officially an arson case. He wasn't about to try to explain why and how it fell to Homicide and to him. Especially not how it fell to him. Mortals couldn't understand a relationship that had spanned eight hundred years.

The place smelled of ash and soot and smoke and he foundered in the false humidity created by the remembered heat and the lingering water vapor from the flames. Every wall or surface he touched was covered with dirt or soot and bits of broken and charred things lay out him like blackened skeletons—tables and chairs and light fixtures—or were trampled underfoot, crunching beneath the heel of his boots.

Making his way from the partially damaged rear of the club to the main dance floor, Nick found that he couldn't reconcile his memory of the Raven, alive with thundering music, the heat and press of mortal bodies, the flash of their clothing and jewelry, the scent of alcohol—and the fainter, more tantalizing scent of blood—hanging in the air. This was a dead place. Or, rather, a place of death.

It was as he passed the cellar stairs that something caught his eye—a flash of opalescent white among the black. With his foot he flicked aside a charred piece of paneling that heat had freed from the wall and saw the gleam again. Nick pick up the pearl earring carefully, the delicate gold wire and bright white pearl dangling from the leather fingers of his gloves like a star against the night sky. How it had remained undamaged was more than a bit of a mystery. But it was still pristine, still perfect and unburned.

It had belonged to Janette. And it was old, older than perhaps even he knew. She'd been wearing them

that night she'd come down to dinner after having returned from abroad, the night he had dared to bargain with LaCroix

Their glasses were brimming with fresh, human blood. Where it had come from was somewhat of a mystery, but tonight Nicholas was not in a mood to challenge LaCroix on that point. He was content, this once, to drink of both the blood and Janette's presence without regret.

Her dress was crimson, brighter even than the blood that sparkled through her crystal goblet. Dinner was, for them, conversation and drinking in the salon, since they had no mortal guests before whom they had to hide their nature and the servants had been sent away for the evening. Janette regaled them with tales of her journeys, of what she had seen and where she had gone, one particular story of a driver who had an unfortunate tendency to beat the poor donkey in his charge despite Janette's warning to the contrary had LaCroix laughing unreservedly—Nicholas could easily envision Janette slipping out of the carriage in which she was traveling, grabbing the stick from the man, and beating him halfway down the mountain, to the utter chagrin and amusement of her traveling companions.

Nick watched her with pride and regard and, for what it was worth in those days, love, drinking in her words and her laughter, her pale white, perfect skin and her brilliant blue eyes with as much enthusiasm as he gave to the wine-laced blood that was their meal. A thread of jealousy colored his hearing of her stories, but he was careful not to betray himself or let her see it. He envied Janette the freedom that LaCroix had given her.

And, while he listened, and laughed, and commented, plotted so that she might be the key to his own freedom.

It seemed an eternity before LaCroix called an end to the evening, asking quietly, "The letters of transfer?"

Janette had been laughing with abandon, but at the soft question she stilled her merriment, her demeanor becoming serious and reserved. "I left them in the study for you. I did not think to bring them here—"

"The study is the perfect place for them." LaCroix rose to his feet and walked over to the couch Janette shared with Nicholas, leaving his empty wine glass on the table where their own glasses now sat drained and abandoned. "If you'll pardon me, I have work to finish before the night gets much older. I think I can best leave you two to entertain yourselves." He took her hand and raised it to his lips, adding, "You *will* try not to disturb me *too* much."

"We shall be as quiet as mice," said Janette primly, although there was a sparkle in her eye.

Nicholas matched her gravity, nodding, "*Church* mice," he further explained.

LaCroix's glance at Nicholas was sharp and searching for a moment—almost a warning in itself. Then he smiled indulgently. "Yes. So I see."

Nicholas turned to watch LaCroix leave, remembering that warning glance. It had to be about their bargain. But he could play by the rules and win. He had to. In the centuries since Janette had lured him into LaCroix's control, she'd been able to refuse him nothing on which she'd not formed a fast preference or opinion . . . and even when she'd set her mind on this thing or that course of action, he'd found that a kiss, or a caress, or some well-chosen words could often change her mind in his favor. She would do almost anything for him.

Hopefully, that included abandoning LaCroix.

"Do I bore you already?" asked Janette, getting his attention by fixing the high collar on his ruffled shirt. "Shall I call back LaCroix to keep you company?"

"You will never bore me." His fingers raised to her hand, grasping it and pressing it against his lips, nipping at her fingertips lightly. "But if you find me tiresome—"

"I often find you tiresome," said Janette sharply. But she was slow to withdraw her hand from his as she turned her back toward him. "When you argue with LaCroix—is it really so difficult to do as he asks? It would make life so much easier if you would simply let him have his way."

"At the cost of my soul?" Nicholas cleared his throat and moved closer to her—the neckline on her dress was low and almost completely off-the-shoulder—as was the current court fashion. Sitting behind her, he pressed his lips to the hollow of her neck, where it met the shoulder and made note of her delighted shiver. "I don't want to talk about LaCroix."

"Neither do I." Janette sank back against him, resting against his chest. "Oh, Nicola, I had such a *grand* time. The moonlight in Venice was breathtaking. I wanted to share it with someone. And for all that I saw, I wished you'd been with me."

Nicholas kissed her throat again, letting his teeth scrape lightly against her neck, and felt her entire body shiver against him. "As do I." He traveled light kisses up her neck, biting lightly at her earlobes, around the pearl earrings, whispering, "Can you imagine what it would be like—traveling the continent again?"

"Ah, but not like peasants this time," said Janette, her breath catching in her throat as his hand slipped the gown further down her arm and freeing the rest of her neck and shoulder. "Like . . . royalty. Palaces and villas and palazzos."

"Gardens. Servants. Carriages." Nicholas shifted her in his arms, letting his words and breath skim lightly along the skin on the other side of her neck. "You'd be treated like a duchess. Like a princess."

"And balls. We must go to every ball and concert and dance we can find. And you must dance when ever I ask you. And not—" she looked at him sharply, "disappear with some china-doll Contessa every time the whim strikes you."

"I'll be yours alone," he promised, slipping the gown from her other shoulder, so that it sank low enough to expose the upper part of her breasts. "You'll have gowns—"

"And jewels—"

"And jewels," he agreed. "Pearls and rubies and sapphires and diamonds."

Janette turned her head, her lips meeting his. With her kiss, he forgot himself, forgot the purpose of his seduction. It only mattered that they had been separated for so long, two parts of a thing now brought together again. She twisted in his arms so that she faced him and he held her, his lips moving from her own and down the length of her neck, even as she kissed along his hairline and down past his earlobe.

"Oh, let's," she said breathily. "Let's travel again, Nicola. There's so much more to see! I'm sure LaCroix would—"

His teeth scraped lightly against her collarbone and she drew in a breath. "No, just us," he corrected. "You and I. We two and only we two."

Janette's hand cupped his chin, pushing him back slightly so that she could meet his eyes. "He *might* allow it."

"I don't intend on asking his permission." Nicholas leaned forward to capture her lips again, whispering, "Come with me. We'd be together, just us without him. We could go anywhere, do anything we wished—"

"No." She pushed him back, this time shifting so that there was some distance between them. Her hands shook as she turned away, adjusting first one shoulder of her gown, then the other. "No, Nicola, we cannot. He would find us. And then—" He saw the shudder run through her and placed his hand on her shoulder, but she shook him off. "No. Not without LaCroix. But perhaps—" Janette turned her head to look at him over her shoulder. "Perhaps if you obeyed him, did not fight him so often, he would let us go ahead of him, have some time to travel alone . . ."

He met her eyes and knew that he had lost—not only this attempt to sway her into leaving LaCroix, but some portion of his senses and reason. She smelled of foreign perfumes, flowery scents grown beneath warm

Italian sunshine, and the blood and wine they had consumed. She smiled, as if sensing his change in mood and turned her back to him again, her hand slipping one side of her dress completely from her, baring her neck and breast.

He pierced her flesh with the swiftness of a cobra, heard her moan low in her throat and worried his teeth in the wound as he drank her blood, her earring lightly dancing against his cheek. The perfume colored the taste, as did the wine. And if there was a bitterness to the failure of his first attempt to win her allegiance from LaCroix, he did not notice the taste for long, seeing further journeys in her blood and in the hours of the night that lay ahead of them.

A noise startled him—someone walking through the mess he'd just traversed. Closing his hand over the earring, Nick straightened and looked around in the gloom.

The dark-haired man was wearing a firefighter's coat and gear—there was a small ax strapped to his waist and a walkie-talkie in his hand. He didn't seem to see Nick at first, looking down at the floor as if following a trail, then moving his gaze to the wall and to the exposed concrete beam that separated the first floor from the second.

Reaching into his jacket, Nick withdrew his ID; his gun, he noted with a small amount of chagrin, was back at the loft, in its holster, slung over a chair in his bedroom. Although he suspected that this particular intruder might be more friend than foe. "Looking for something?" he asked lightly.

The man looked up slowly, obviously startled but not giving wanting to give notice of the fact—Nick immediately pegged him for a very cool customer. "Eric Petrie, Arson inspector. This is a crime scene, sir, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to—"

This was the man Natalie had warned him about, the man who'd asked her about the vampires.

"Nick Knight, Homicide." Nick passed along his ID, which Petrie barely glanced at before returning it.

"I didn't realize Homicide had been called in." Straightening, Petrie took a step closer to him and Nick had the distinct impression that he was being given the once over. He seemed to pass, because Petrie smiled grimly and gestured around the club. "Although it's only by the grace of God and some great timing that we aren't hip deep in bodies. I saw the aftermath of a club burning in New York, once. It wasn't pretty."

Nick nodded, his memory filled with the scenes of slaughter he'd witnessed over the ages, bodies three and four deep scattered through fields of mud and blood and limbs, bloated from a day in the sunlight. "I can imagine." Then he shrugged and gestured. "When I heard the call, I thought I'd stop by, see what was up. Thought somebody could use a hand."

"A hand, yes. But next time give me a holler before you go barging in on one of my scenes. As far as I'm concerned, you're trampling evidence under foot."

"Sorry," said Nick, with a gracious smile. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Besides which, we haven't had the building inspector out here yet—which is why all the entrances weren't taped off yet, I guess. You came in through the—?"

"Side door," supplied Nick, gesturing to his left. "There's a loading door back there."

"Right. I'll have them seal that a.s.a.p. All I need is kids or gore-hounds getting in here."

Petrie headed off to his right, following the line of what Nick could now see indicated an accelerant—while Petrie was relying on the flashlight in his hand, Nick could spot the difference in the fire line easily.

"You think the building's unstable?"

"Naw. The structure looks good. Looks like most of the damage is cosmetic—fire burned hot and bright here, there's the flash point." Petrie's light picked out a spot at the center of the dance floor. Then the light was panned back toward the left, from where Nick had entered. "We've got some damage back to that door, I guess. But I've been told the lower floor is intact. Lot of stone in these old buildings. But I'm not letting a

full crew in here to check it out until we can get a city building inspection crew to run through the place. That's not going to happen until tomorrow morning."

Nick drew in a breath, pausing while Petrie walked onward. If the lower level was intact, it meant much of Janette's blood stock was still in bottles in storage. Not sending an investigative team through would allow the vampires a chance to remove the evidence—inspection tape and a few pieces of wood nailed across doors would be no barrier to them. Was this intentional? Did Petrie want to give them a chance to clear out, before questions were asked?

A noise, off to his left, alerted him to another presence . . . the barely present scent of singed flesh told him in no uncertain terms that one of the vampires had followed him over from the warehouse.

"Well, unless the arson crew finds something tomorrow, I'd say you wasted a trip, Knight."

"Not a complete waste." Nick walked toward Petrie. "I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know what happens on this one."

"Why, you used to be a regular?" The light flashed briefly in Nick's eyes, then traveled past him—did Petrie know about the other visitor? "From what I've heard, it sounded like a young crowd. Wild, maybe."

Nick paced Petrie as he moved to the left, light flashing this way and that, but uncovering nothing. "I've dropped by for a drink now and then."

"No friends here, then?"

"No." Nick met Petrie's eyes and took a step closer. Concentrating, he listened to the man's heartbeat, caught the rhythm and tone of the pulse in his cadence. "I think it's time you got out of here."

Petrie's eyes widened slightly, but then he looked away. "Yeah, maybe you're right. I hate early morning fires—throws off my whole day." Petrie turned, his flashlight pointing downward as he walked carefully through the debris. "I'd appreciate it if you'd leave the scene, at least until my guys get a chance to go through it."

He hadn't hypnotized Petrie . . . although his suggestion might have taken. Nick took a few steps after the arson inspector, then stopped. "Damn—I think I dropped my ID."

Petrie stopped at the foot of the steps that led up to the doorway. "Want me to wait?"

"No—I think I see it. I'll be right behind you."

"Knight?"

He turned back just as a plastic object was hurled toward him. Instinctively, Nick reached up and snatched the flashlight from the air. "Thanks."

"Nice catch," said Petrie. Then he turned and walked up the concrete steps, to the open doorway.

Nick averted his eyes from the light there and moved further into the shadowed section of the building. When his eyes were acclimated to the darkness again, he saw Miklos standing no more than a few feet away from him. "You took a chance coming here," said Nick grimly. "There's nothing—I've looked—"

"I know him. That man."

Nick looked up and saw that Miklos was staring at the doorway, despite the bright daylight that shone in through it. "That's Eric Petrie. He's with arson."

"He's left messages for his sister." Miklos met Nick's gaze, his expression blank. "He drops them on the bar, wrapped in a napkin."

"His sister?"

"She was brought across a year ago. Perhaps . . . two?" A wan smile flickered across Miklos' features and he looked down at the floor. "Time seems so much the same these days."

Nick took a step closer to the door and the bright sunlight there. He'd have to make a mad dash for his car in a minute—Petrie would be expecting him to follow. There was a good line of shadow across the street, even at this later hour. He'd have a good chance of making it into the shade before he'd start to smoke.

He somehow doubted Petrie would remain oblivious to that.

"Is there an answer?"

"Not through here," said Miklos. He reached down and picked up a partially burned coaster, then traced the design with his finger. "Sometimes the messages reach her. Sometimes they don't. If she answers, I don't know anything about it." His long, pale fingers closed around the coaster and it crumbled to bits in his grip. "It's wrong to keep ties open to the other world."

"I can understand," said Nick softly. "He's family, after all."

"She has a new family now."

Surprised at the sudden intensity in Miklos' tone, he turned . . . but Miklos' expression was still blank, still carefully void of feeling. "Janette did not approve," he said, opening his fist and then brushing the charred bits of the coaster to the floor.

"She wouldn't have." Nick watched the burned bits of coaster rain at his feet, negative snow. "Have any of the others said anything?"

"There isn't much to say. The mortals dance. They drink. They leave. Sometimes alone, sometimes with others." He shrugged, then hesitated. "But there was one last night—an argument."

Nick raised an eyebrow, waiting.

"About a woman, of course. Two men. Janette had one of the men thrown out and let the woman and her companion remain." The wan smile appeared again. "The woman was crying and her friend tried to protect her. Janette has a soft heart." The smile disappeared. "*Had* a soft heart."

"And she would have ripped yours out of your chest if she'd heard you say that." Nick nodded, considering the news. "Right—I'll look into it. See if you can get any information—descriptions, names, that sort of thing."

"Yes."

Nick caught Miklos' bandaged hand and dropped the earring into his palm. Then he closed the long fingers over it. "Spread the word—I want information, *not* bodies. I don't want anyone else pursuing this. It's mine. It's my right."

There was something in Miklos' gaze that seemed to debate his assertion, but then Miklos looked down at his hand and clenched his fingers tightly over the earring. "Will you follow the old ways?"

"No." Nick smiled sadly. "These are new days. We have to be careful."

Miklos met his eyes again. "Justice will be served?"

"Justice," said Nick carefully, lingering on the word. "Not vengeance."

"It's enough, then." Miklos turned, the hand with the earring clutched to his chest. "But vengeance has a better after-taste."

Nick watched him make his way back to the rear entrance. "Miklos?"

He stopped, waiting.

"The building inspectors will be here tomorrow morning. The cellar should be cleared."

"We'll take care of it." Miklos glanced at Nick over his shoulder. "Life goes on, does it not?"

But there was no sign of acceptance or resignation in Miklos' expression. And as Nick turned up the collar of his jacket and walked resolutely toward the sunlight pouring in through the broken front door of the club, he couldn't fault the other vampire.

Vengeance *did* have a better after-taste.

CHAPTER SEVEN

She'd had six hours of sleep.

At least that's what Natalie told herself, yawning as she buttoned her blouse and gazed into the mirror with bleary eyes. Not that she'd actually slept a wink. What she'd had was a good six hours of tossing and turning, all interspersed with occasionally bouts of talking herself out of calling Nick's cell phone to see if he was all right. It was the idea of him trying to deal with her on the phone while surrounded by a roomful of hungry vampires who had nothing better to do than listen to his conversation with a mortal that finally knocked that idea clean out of her head.

Well, maybe for a hour or so

Natalie made her way through her 'morning' at home in rush mode—making the bed, feeding Sydney, making a mental note to do laundry tomorrow that she should have done yesterday. Before she knew it, she was in her car and on her way to work, catching the end of rush-hour traffic a good hours before sunset.

As she sat at a red light and felt the warmth of the sun creep over the dashboard and onto her fingers, she worried again about whether Nick had gone back to the loft or stayed put at the warehouse like she'd suggested. Knowing him, he'd gone home.

She couldn't blame him, really. She'd gotten the impression that more than a few of the wounded weren't exactly thrilled to be locked up for the day in his company. Miklos seemed to be all right. But she still would have been happier knowing that Nick was in a nice, dark place for the day. Never mind the fact that any mortal wandering into the warehouse during the daylight hours stood a better change with the wounded and hungry vampires if Nick was there than if he wasn't.

Natalie tried to drive those thoughts from her mind, too. A glance at the driver of nearby car—a dark-haired woman—helped because it made her think of Janette.

She still wasn't sure what she thought of Janette's destruction. They hadn't exactly been 'friends,' more like acquaintances. And despite their differing viewpoints—and there were a lot of those—she'd always felt a not-so-grudging respect for Janette and a wish that they'd gotten a chance to talk. Not banter about Nick or the superiority of vampires over mortals or any of that nonsense . . . just talk. There was an ease to Janette that she envied, a woman who seemed in complete possession of herself and in control of the world around her.

But she wasn't, was she? Just like Nick, Janette belonged to LaCroix. Or that seemed the subtext whenever she'd tried to discuss the situation with Nick and been led firmly and not-too-artfully to another topic of conversation. Unlike Nick, she seemed to accept her fate. Seemed to thrive.

'Seemed' was the operative word. There were other things she'd seen in Janette, glimpses of a deeper, sensitive self, that made her wonder how much of the devil-may-care, *joie de vie* was an act. Not that she'd ever gotten a chance to investigate her theory.

And now she'd never know.

As the traffic eased—finally!—Natalie turned the car into the parking lot beneath the Coroner's Office building. She grabbed her purse and her light spring jacket automatically and headed for the elevator, still lost in thought.

She couldn't begin to estimate what this might do to Nick. She'd remembered what had happened when another old friend of his—Erica, wasn't it?—had committed the vampire equivalent of suicide. Nick hadn't handled that well and his depression had frightened her, bordering on suicide at times. His relationship with

Janette had spanned a longer length of time . . . and been a hell of a lot more complicated. They'd been brother and sister in a way, definitely lovers—although she'd prefer to think that aspect of their relationship wasn't as active as it once had been—and, well, the only term she could think of to describe it would be 'survivors.' They'd had a lot of history together. Losing Janette must be like losing a part of himself.

Natalie walked out into the hallway as the door opened and thought of Richard—how she'd felt when her brother was dying, how she'd pleaded with Nick and used every piece of emotional blackmail she could to get him to bring her brother across. Yes, she could understand some of the depth of feel that Nick was enduring. Some of it, if sorrow could be color-coded and shaded with intensity. Although there was a point where all the different levels of intensity met, where it couldn't get any worse and yet it was—that heart-rending, earth-shattering feeling of believing that you couldn't manage to deal with that much pain. But you had to. Life went on, with or without you.

Richard was gone, after all, and she was still here.

Hanging her coat on a hook by the door, Natalie smiled and gave a brief "Hi," to one of the day-shift coroners. She rarely saw Abel Ranvovich any more, but he'd been her mentor when she'd first signed on to the Coroner's Office and, from all accounts, he'd been a coroner for as long as anyone could remember. He was standing at the sink washing his hands and looked up at her greeting.

"Heard you had a late morning, Natalie." Grabbing a paper towel from the dispenser, he gestured toward the cooler, where the bodies were kept. "But I didn't find any new clients when I came on shift."

"We were lucky. It was a dance club but the fire happened after hours." She dumped her purse on her desk and watched him turn back to the sink. "Do you *always* wash your hands twice?"

"Once for me and once for my Mrs. I don't like to bring the smell of death home." He shook his head, smiling. "It's a shame, you know. I let them get all wrinkled in the water, but when they dry the wrinkles are still there."

Natalie walked over to him and peered down at his hands with mock-severity. "I dunno, Abe—I think that's a sign of age."

"No, memory loss is a sign of age. These—" he shook his wet hand at her, making her jump back as he grabbed another towel. "These are a sign of living. Do you know how many bodies these hands have cut into?"

Natalie leaned back against the counter and shook her head. "No, but I'm sure you're going to tell me."

"I don't know. I lost track. Should've kept count, really. Could have been a pretty big number." He picked up his eyeglasses from beside the sink, put them on, then stared at her. "You carrying someone else's luggage? You should be home, sleeping, with bags like that under your eyes."

"Double shifts," explained Natalie. "Somebody had to cover the fire, just in case."

"Well, you let somebody *else* cover the fire, tonight. God willing there isn't one." Abel raised his eyes to heaven, then lowered his gaze back to her and shook his finger at her sternly. "You hear me? You go home after one shift tonight. I'm going to check Grace's log book when I get in tomorrow to make sure. Just see if I don't."

"I'll make sure I get out on time. Promise," she added, when he gave her a suspicious look. Then she walked over to the clipboard set atop the filing cabinet and looked at it. "Slow day, huh? We certainly could use a slow night around here."

"Yeah. More complaints about the overtime from administration." Abel drew himself up to his full height of five feet and eleven inches—if you counted the two inch tuft of gray hair that stood upright from the center of his head. "I told them there's only one way to cut back on overtime—tell people to stop killing each other and dropping dead. Mrs. Ranvovich, she tells me that I need to be home more. Why should I be home? The dead bodies are here."

"But Mrs. Ranvovich's cooking is at home," reminded Natalie.

"True." Abel nodded and headed for the door, but paused and pointed at her. "That reminds me, Mrs. Ranvovich says you haven't been over in a dog's age. She wants to feed you and pester you about getting married and having kids."

Natalie smiled. "That's why I haven't been over in a dog's age. But you can tell Mrs. Ranvovich that my life hasn't been the same without her chicken dumplings."

"I will." Abel nodded again. "And you know she'll make enough for an army just to send some to you and I'll be eating chicken dumplings for a week. You—you, Natalie Lambert—you do those things just to make my life difficult." But then he smiled and pointed toward her again. "You should come back to day shift before I retire. I miss working with you. You have a nice night, now."

"You too, Dr. Ranvovich." Natalie held her breath as the door closed behind him, then sighed in relief. She didn't bother to fight her chuckle as she contemplated the discussion between Dr. and Mrs. Ranvovich when he finally arrived home, knowing that a lot of it would be about her. They were a nice couple, kind and caring, but lonely, with no children or immediate relations. They'd tried to 'adopt' her and she'd resisted their well-meaning protectiveness, a good part of her spirit wanting to assert itself and prove that she could make it on her own. But Abel and his wife had taken her rebellion in stride and still continued to feed her . . . when they remembered that she existed.

Still trying to catch her breath after that brief but intensive session with Dr. Ranvovich, Natalie walked over to her desk and reached for the phone, intending to call Nick. But a glance at her blotter stopped her and she picked up the pink message slip with a mixture of dread and curiosity.

Inspector Eric Petrie had called about an hour before she'd arrived. There was no return number, only a note that said he'd tried to call back later.

Natalie held the note in her hand, remembering what he'd said. He knew about the existence of vampires. There was another mortal who actually *knew* about the existence of vampires.

The thought stunned her.

And frightened her. After all, he might be some sort of vampire hunter, as Liam had been. Or . . . he might be someone she could talk to. Someone who'd understand what it was like to tread the fine line between life and death, to walk in a world of shadows and still remain alive and mortal.

For the moment, all thoughts of calling Nick fell by the wayside as she stared at the pink memo paper in her hand . . . and wondered.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Half a bottle of blood, a few hours of sleep, and a shower later, Nick stood in front of the bathroom mirror and shrugged into a fresh silk shirt. He turned his cheek and was pleased to see that most of the burn he'd gotten from the sunlight on his dash from the Raven and his return drive back to the loft was nothing more than a memory, although the pain still lingered.

As did the pain of his loss. Fingers pausing on a button of his shirt, he gazed into the mirror. Janette was gone, but he couldn't quite bring himself to believe it, not after the centuries they'd shared together. Even when he'd tried to escape from LaCroix he'd always known he'd find her again, would return to her in time.

Almost two hundred years ago it had been and it still seemed like yesterday—

"I'm going to leave."

It had been early the next evening. LaCroix had absented himself, wearing a satisfied smile as he'd bid Nicholas good night. He was certain that LaCroix knew what his plans were, but preferred not to offer details, just in case.

Janette had decided to dine in this evening and was sipping at a recently bottled vintage, frowning slightly as if dissatisfied with the taste. She looked up as his announcement and raised an eyebrow. "Really? I may join you, then. Travel has broadened my palette. I'm afraid this simply won't do." Setting the glass aside, she rose from her chair and walked toward him, grabbing his arm and tugging on it like a child. "Let's go hunting, Nicola. It's a lovely night. Paris can spare a few men and women of quality to feed us, no?"

With a reluctant sigh, Nicholas disengaged her arm from his own, the released her. "No," he answered. "And that's not what I meant."

Annoyed, Janette sank into the nearest chair with a pout. She flung her leg over the arm of the chair and let it watch it sway to and fro lazily. "I don't see the point of going out if you're not going to hunt. Unless—is there a new show?"

"I'm not going 'out.' I'm leaving Paris."

"Oh?" Another pout. "And I've only gotten home! Trust LaCroix to send you away to—where *is* he sending you?"

"He's not *sending* me anywhere." Nicholas leaned over the arm of the chair, his face inches from her own. "I'm leaving Paris. Tonight."

Janette blinked, then she shook her head sadly. "No, Nicola. You know that he'll find you and drag you back. He always does."

"Not this time." He straightened, pretending to a certitude he didn't have. And, for once, Janette seemed to accept his performance at face value. "I'm going to disappear."

Sitting up in the chair, she watched him as he crossed the room, her arms crossing her chest and her hands pressing down the folds of her puffed sleeves as if she felt a chill. "Nicola, you *can't* be serious." Then she rose to her feet and all but launched herself at him, so that he caught her in his arms. Janette reached up to trace the line of his jaw down from his ear, her finger linger on the curve of his lips. "Not so soon," she whispered. "I've only just returned. If you and LaCroix must battle, let there be peace for a little while at least. Call a truce for my sake."

"I'm leaving." He steeled himself against the softness of her in his arms, her light touch upon his skin and

the scent of her. Closing his eyes, Nicholas pushed her back, set her on her feet, then turned away. "I have to leave. There's no choice in the matter. If this keeps up it will be the one of us or the other."

"Nicola, you're no match for him."

He opened his eyes as her arms slipped around his waist from the rear. Linking her hands together, she drew flush against him. Nicholas could hear the rustle of the starched sleeves and felt the edge of the buckle on the high best of her dress pressing against his skin even through his jacket and waistcoat. He wanted nothing more than to turn and take her in his arms, to sink his fangs into the inviting flesh of her neck, to feed from her and to be fed from *by* her.

But he had to convince her that he was serious. His freedom depended on this.

"Then I have to leave. Or die."

"Don't say such things." Her grip on him tightened and she pressed her face into his back, her voice muffled by his coat. "Nicola—no. You must be wrong. I've seen no sign of this. LaCroix . . . he is your *master*. He wants only what is best for you, that you be true to your nature. You know that. He only wishes you to be—"

He turned quickly, surprising her. With his fingers, Nicholas caught hold of her chin, fixing her gaze on his own. "What he wants me to be will destroy me. If I stay, he'll destroy me. If I leave, he'll follow me and destroy me. What choice do I have? If I leave, there's at least a chance . . ."

Her eyes were wounded, troubled, anguished. Nicholas released her chin and she lowered her head to his breast, hugging him. "You won't survive on your own. You need looking after. When you've been away from us, you've always come to harm. Please, don't do this thing. Don't leave us. Don't leave me."

Nicholas fought the urge to smile—she was weakening. He kissed her forehead lightly. "I need you to look after me. Come with me, Janette. We can hide from LaCroix—he'd never find us. We could be safe. We could be free."

"No." She drew back from him slightly and looked up to meet his gaze. Something had changed in that instant—he wasn't certain what, but he knew then that he'd lost again. "No," Janette repeated, taking a step back from him. "Don't ask me that. I can't leave him. I won't."

He pursued her, taking one step forward for every step she took backward until she was trapped against a chair, clutching it desperately to keep from falling as he loomed over her. "Don't you *want* to be free?" he asked, astonished. "You can't tell me that you *enjoy* the way he forces you to live, always at his beck and call, subject to his will and whims?"

"No, I don't enjoy it. I would give *anything* to be free of him." She hesitated, looking past his shoulder. "Almost anything," she said softly, then her eyes focused on his face again. "But he is my master, *our* master. That means something, Nicola, whatever you may think. It means *something*."

His fingers clenched, but Nicholas held his fist to his side. He moved an inch closer to her and, when Janette shrank back, whirled and crossed the room, moving in the other direction. "Then I'll leave you with him. I wish joy on the both of you, but I'll not be a part of this any longer. If you want to stay, then stay, but don't expect to keep me here."

"Fine. Then go. Go!"

A pillow struck the back of his head and Nicholas whirled, eyes blazing gold and fangs at the ready, only to find Janette in much the same state. "Go!" she hissed again, her fingers digging through the upholstery around the wooden arms of the chair, as if she meant to lift it and throw it at him. "Damn you! Go! I never want to see you again!"

Nicholas moved quickly, clamping his fingers on her wrists and pinning her hands to the chair. When she struggled, he pressed her against the side of it, trapping her. He wasn't entirely certain who bit whom first and where, but his hands moved to her shoulders, holding her in place as he sunk his fangs into her, his knees

weakening as she followed suit. They sank to the carpet together, feeding, kissing, and losing bits of clothing to fingernails and fangs.

For that time there was nothing else in the world but Janette and himself and the blood they shared. And even, hours later, he didn't hear the door open, looking up only when he heard LaCroix's voice.

"Nicholas—I'm gratified to see that you're still here."

Swallowing, Nicholas looked up to meet LaCroix's gaze, then followed that gaze down to Janette, who was lying beneath him on the floor. She half turned and smiled up at him, and then at LaCroix, not seeming to notice that her dress was lying in tatters on the floor around and beneath them.

"I'm gratified to see that you're *both* still here," said LaCroix, as if correcting himself. Then, still wearing that satisfied smile, he turned and left, closing the door behind him.

Nick looked down at his hand and found he'd torn the button from his shirt. Wearily he shrugged out of it, slung it over his shoulder, and walked out of the bathroom. There went another shirt—he'd have to go shopping for more soon. Or learn to stop ripping holes in them.

It was while he was on his way to the bedroom that he simply had a 'feeling' and looked down.

LaCroix was standing in the center of the loft by the couch, a glass in his hand, sipping blood. He glanced up at Nick casually, then turned and walked toward the shuttered windows, pausing there as if he could see through the metal slats to the twilight world outside.

Nick waited for a full heartbeat, hands on the rail, looking down.

"We have *both* lost her," said LaCroix.

His voice was no louder than it needed to be, yet there was something more in the nature of a scream of anguish in that quiet statement than any raised voice could have contained. Not bothering with the stairs, Nick flew to the lower level with the speed of thought, the shirt fluttering away from him, drifting down to the upper landing only after he'd reached LaCroix's side.

"You know?"

There was a bitter smile on LaCroix's lips, but his gaze was still fastened on the shutters, or the world beyond them. "Yes. I know."

It was all there—the contempt for believing that LaCroix could be her master, *their* master and not have known . . . and the sorrow for what that lack of understanding truly meant. Nick took a step closer and watched LaCroix's features, which betrayed nothing. Only in his eyes could it be seen, a sorrow that in someone else he might have said bordered on madness.

But not in LaCroix. LaCroix was *always* in control.

"Did you . . . did you feel it?" asked Nick quietly.

"Yes." The smile faded and disappeared. LaCroix looked at him with a cold, searching gaze. "What is it the mortals say—at least she didn't suffer?" He turned away again. "Small comfort, that. Janette suffered. She did not suffer long, but she suffered." A shudder ran through him, it was so sudden and swift that Nick wasn't certain he'd seen it, until LaCroix added, "She left me before the end. And you—?"

That gaze was fixed on his again. Throat tight, Nick nodded, remembering his dream and how it had ended with that overwhelming sense of defeat, of surrender.

"So, then, Janette died alone. How unlike her. I would have thought she'd have been glad of the company."

"She's—she *is* dead, then," asked Nick, forcing the words from his throat.

"Yes." Lifting the glass of blood to his lips, LaCroix threw back his head and drained it. Faster than a mortal eye could follow, he threw the glass across the room and into the fireplace, where it smashed magnificently. "Our Janette is no more."

At that instant and only at that instant did the sheer weight of it fall on him. Nick's knees buckled and he sank to the floor, too stunned to feel anything except the abyss within him, the sense of loss that he had thought he'd understood and acknowledged, but which he'd only put away, to be dealt with at another time. What he hadn't understood was that the time to deal with it wasn't to be of his own choosing.

LaCroix placed a hand on his shoulder, the weight resting there for a brief moment before he walked away. Nick bowed his head, his senses overwhelmed by the white noise of unbounded emotion. He couldn't summon any tears, nor did he try. This loss was beyond tears, beyond words, beyond measuring. Janette had been and now . . . was not.

"There will never be another like her," said LaCroix, from behind him. "Which is our loss. She'll be difficult to replace."

The sense of the words somehow filtered through the sorrow and anguish that had swallowed him. "Replaced?" echoed Nick. He pushed himself up from the floor and turned on LaCroix warily, a sense of anger stilling the tremors that threatened to shake him apart. "Replaced?" he asked again. "You don't mean—?"

"I *do* mean. And soon." LaCroix had walked over to the far staircase. He turned and gestured toward the windows. "We must preserve the balance. There were three of us. There will be three of us again."

The thought sickened him. Nick clenched his fists and turned away from LaCroix, fighting back the raw anger that he knew would only get him maimed. "I'm surprised you've waited this long, if you cared so little for—"

The words were barely out of his mouth when he found himself held against the wall, LaCroix's hand beneath his neck, holding him several inches above the floor. "Don't!" hissed LaCroix in warning, eyes red and half-closed. "If you value your life, Nicholas, *don't* try me now. I'm *not* in the mood."

Removing his hand from Nick's throat, LaCroix released him and then walked away. "Now—where was I?"

Nick scrambled to his knees, his hands moving to his throat, massaging the bruises that would fade once he'd fed. He hadn't realized LaCroix was that close to the edge. He opened his mouth to say something—and produced little more than a croak.

"Oh, yes," said LaCroix evenly, as if discussing the weather. "Janette's replacement." He turned toward Nick and stared down at him. "Not that you've given me any reason to be, but I'm feeling somewhat benevolent this evening. I think it would be best to find a companion that's well suited to you. Say, very much like your Dr. Lambert."

"No." Nick managed that one word with an effort and struggled to his feet, grabbing the wall for support. But he *did* rise to face LaCroix. "No. I won't—"

LaCroix shrugged and dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand. "All right, then. Choose another."

"Another?" Words were getting easier, even if his throat was still sore. Nick licked his lips, desperately wanting to run to his refrigerator, grab the nearest bottle of cow's blood and drink until his senses were dulled into bloody oblivion. But he couldn't, not now.

"Yes, *another*. Meaning 'some other,'" said LaCroix, as if speaking to a particularly dim-witted student. He walked toward Nick slowly. "There must be three, Nicholas. We must have balance. Just as Janette brought you to me, I want you to bring someone else. Someone . . . suitable. The choice is yours, although I'll retain a final veto. You shouldn't have too much difficulty—you know my preferences."

Nick swallowed, then straightened. "No. I can't. Janette and—it was a mistake. I can't—"

"You *can*. And you *will*." LaCroix's smile chilled him. "In twenty-four hours you'll bring me a suitable candidate . . . or I'll be forced to make my own choice. And I think you know who that might be."

The mechanism for the elevator sounded. Nick started at the noise, then turned to face LaCroix . . . but heard only the swoosh of his passing for his trouble. He glanced up at the skylight and saw a blur of black.

He couldn't let that happen to Nat, he couldn't let LaCroix bring her across. What had happened on Valentine's Day—what had *almost* happened—still gave him nightmares. It was only his interest in her, and her interest in him, that had brought Natalie to LaCroix's attention. Her life was in danger because of him.

But to save her, he had to find someone else, someone LaCroix would find 'suitable' to serve as Janette's replacement. LaCroix would want to bring her across, of course, but he remembered how much time he and Janette spent together in the beginning when he was learning to hunt and to feed, and to enjoy his new-found vampire senses. LaCroix would expect that of him. LaCroix would *demand* that of him.

And, Nick suddenly realized, that he'd demand it of himself. What was one more blot on his soul, one more death on his conscience, but to deliver another soul to LaCroix and not to shield her from the worst of it? Not to tell her that there *was* another way, that one could feed from something other than a living victim, that a vampire no longer had to kill to survive . . . that would be a stain he'd never remove. He'd have to quit his job, leave this place and begin a new life somewhere else, once their fledgling had been brought up to speed. If he paid attention, if he devoted his time and his experience to LaCroix's changeling, the transition might be easier for her. He might be able to keep her from making the mistakes that he'd made, of damning herself for the eternity she faced walking among mortals.

He'd have to leave Toronto. He'd have to leave Natalie.

With a groan, Nick realized that LaCroix had trapped him, thoroughly and completely. If he did as LaCroix asked, he'd betray all he'd fought for by handing over another life to be warped by darkness and dedicate himself to saving what little light he could in the soul he chose. If he didn't do as LaCroix asked . . . Natalie would be condemned to an eternity as a vampire with LaCroix as her master.

There was no choice, really.

The elevator door opened and Schanke peered his head around the corner. "Yo, Nick? You said you'd follow me down to Artie's so I could drop off my car—boy, you look like hell. You sick or something?"

"Something," agreed Nick. He wiped his face with his hands, then met Schanke's gaze. "Yeah, I'm sick. I was gonna call in, but I didn't get a chance—I don't think I'm up to it tonight."

"Oh, no, no, no, no, no, pulezze, tell me I'm dreaming?" Schanke put his hands together as if in prayer and followed Nick as he headed from the couch. "If we don't get this case closed, Cohen will yank my vacation. And Myra's got her heart set on a week of sun and fun, not to mention the fact that the tickets are non-refundable . . ."

Sinking down onto the couch, Nick looked up at Schanke. "I can't. I'm sorry . . . but I can't." He wiped his hand over his face again and barely caught the flicker of annoyance that flashed across his partner's features. "Look, we *both* know Mancetti was there. Just talk to him. He's got a big mouth, he'll trip himself up. At least, that's what you were telling me last night."

"Yeah, but that was when I was planning on playing good cop, bad cop. Now I'll have to pull in Stevens. Mancetti'll be so interested in making time with her—he's partial to redheads—I won't get word one out of him." Schanke sank down on the arm of the couch, beside Nick.

Nick pushed him off the couch arm. "That should give you even more of an edge."

"It might. Yeah," said Schanke thoughtfully. Brushing down the side of his coat, he nodded and smiled down at Nick. "Yeah, that'll work great! Mancetti can't resist a nice pair of—"

"Schanke! She's a fellow officer," warned Nick.

All innocence, Schanke blinked. "What? Eyes. I was gonna say 'eyes.'"

Resting his face in his hand, Nick murmured, "Sure you were. Look, you can take my Caddie to work. I'll call Artie's and have him tow your car in."

"Thanks. Great." Then Schanke cleared his throat. "You sure about this Artie guy? I've never heard of a mechanic who works nights."

"He doesn't have much of a choice." Nick looked up at Schanke and forced a smile as he rose to his feet. "Trust me. He's the only one I'll let work on the Caddie any more."

"That's good enough for me. The way you baby that thing—geez, Nick, you really gotta get a family. You're wasting all your affection on that hunk of metal. And what does it ever give you but grief?" Schanke reached into his pocket, pulled out his car keys, then dropped them into Nick's waiting palm. Leaning over the back of the couch, Nick opened the small wooden box on the table and pulled out his own keys, which he tossed to Schanke.

"Thanks," said Schanke. "There won't be a scratch on her."

"There better not be," warned Nick. But his heart wasn't really in bantering. He settled back down on the couch, wondering what he was going to do, barely recognizing the fact that Schanke was on his way to the elevator door.

"I'll tell Cohen you're not up to shift tonight—and you'll owe me for that one." He heard the elevator door open, then Schanke paused. "By the way, shame about what happened to the Raven. Janette okay about that?"

Nick was on his feet in the blink of an eye. He turned and faced Schanke, the couch enough of a physical barrier to remind him that he was supposed to be a mortal. "What—what did you hear?"

"About the fire at the Raven. Some of the afternoon shift were regulars at Happy Hour. Said they liked the scenery." Schanke took a step toward him. "Janette's okay, right? I mean, I didn't hear about any injuries or fatalities. I figured her biggest headache right now would be the insurance."

"The . . . insurance." Nick wasn't certain whether he wanted to laugh or cry.

"You've heard from her, right?"

Turning away, Nick ran his hand through his hair, trying to find an answer that Schanke might accept. "No," he said honestly. "I haven't."

And never would again . . .

"She's probably okay," said Schanke comfortingly. "Has a lot on her plate right now. Myra's cousin Oscar's grocery store burned down, up in Moosejaw? We didn't see him for *days*. And when we finally did, he couldn't get off the phone—what with the fire department, the health department, and the insurance people. His wife swore she was gonna super-glue the phone to his ear."

Nick chuckled beneath his breath and cast a sidelong look at Schanke. "Thanks."

"She'll get a hold of you when she's got a minute." Schanke shrugged. "You know women—they've got a whole different set of priorities."

"Yeah. I guess they do, sometimes."

"Take it easy," called Schanke, throwing back the elevator door and then allowing it to close. "And you definitely owe me for Cohen—"

The door closed with a final 'thud' and Nick heard the elevator mechanism engage. With a sigh, he sank back down on the couch. Janette's affairs would have to be cared for, her mortal life closed in some acceptable, understandable way—from a police and legal perspective. LaCroix would leave him in charge of that, they didn't want any vampire 'fixes' to interfere with this one. No, that would be his duty.

Just as it would be his duty to find a replacement for her, some other soul to condemn to the darkness he'd endured for eight-hundred years.

Covering his face with his hands again, Nick felt the sorrow of Janette's loss surge over him and wondered if he really could face even a year, never mind eight-hundred, without her.

CHAPTER NINE

Natalie slid the tray back into the cooler, then closed the door and leaned heavily on it, tears gathering at the corner of her eyes. For a moment she simply stood there, resting her cheek against the cold metal. She hated when a family member had to come in to identify a body.

It never really mattered whether it was accident or murder—in this case, a college student who'd been riding a bicycle and fell the wrong way when a car slammed into him—it was still death, unexpected and sudden. Natalie had taken a minute beforehand, knowing that they were downstairs, and brushed back the boy's hair, scraped some of the gravel from his cheek, and turned his head to hide the ugly purple swelling, the only outward sign of the broken neck that had been the instantaneous cause of death. It looked like he was sleeping.

The father had tried to remain composed, his arm around his wife, who was weeping even before the drawer was opened. One look, and tears had filled the father's eyes. "Yes," he said. "That's my boy. That's Tommy—" And then he'd begun to sob.

An attendant had walked them out—she just couldn't do it, not today. Not after all that had happened. Thoughts of Richard were too close to the surface of her mind and her heart. Odd, but that was one thing she'd missed, in her attempt to have Nick save Richard—she'd never had to identify the body. In the end, after Richard had become a vampire and Nick had been forced to destroy him, there had been no body, not even a sprinkle of ashes. The family had buried an empty casket while Richard had slept upstairs in Nick's loft, wandering between death and a world beyond death, and in the end it had remained empty.

Natalie cleared her throat and let her fingers rest at her mouth, remembering his cry. The wood had passed through him and when the sunlight had stuck him, there was only a flash of brilliance . . . and then he was gone. Nick had said it was something to do with the fact that Richard was such a young vampire and promised that if he'd go, she'd trip over the pile of ash he'd leave on the loft floor.

She'd smacked him for that, for the macabre reminder that such a thing was possible or that he'd even consider mentioning it. But it was his sense of humor and it *had* shaken her out of her depression.

Again, she wondered if the fire had left anything of Janette. More ashes wouldn't go noticed at a fire scene. Would Nick be able to tell what was Janette and what was a piece of wallboard or a wooden chair? Most probably, Janette would be scooped up and hauled away with the debris from the fire.

The thought angered Natalie—Janette deserved better than that. A headstone, at least. She'd have to ask Nick about that, what he planned. A mortal showing up at a vampire memorial service—did they even have them?—was probably out of the question. There had to be *something* she could do . . .

The lab door opened and Nick leaned in. "Nat?"

His face was drawn, his hair anything but in place—it looked like he hadn't even run a comb through it this evening. She usually liked it like that, slightly mussed, but it gave her a clear indication of the turmoil he was in; Nick was almost fanatic about his appearance, every crease pressed, every item in the loft in its exact place. It was one of the things she found both annoying and endearing about him.

He took a step into the lab as she nodded and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Are you all right?"

"Me? Oh, I'm fine," she answered, voice hoarse. Natalie gestured over her shoulder toward the cooler. "Just an ID. I hate those things, you know."

"I know." Walking toward her, Nick took her hand in his and squeezed it lightly. "It's almost as bad as notification. You stand at the door and you think about the husband or wife or child inside. Until you ring that bell, or knock, the person they're waiting for is just late, they'll be home any second."

"Yeah." Natalie smiled. "The dinner's burned, or they're late going somewhere, or there's a game opposite a mini-series and they're setting up for a fight over the TV remote—"

"But then," Nick paused and met her eyes, "once you knock, it's over. You hear the steps when they walk to the door. Half the time they open it and think you're a salesman or something. Sometimes they know as soon as they see you—they just *know* . . ."

A shiver ran through her as she looked at him. If Nick were mortal, she'd dread that knock at the door, especially while he was a Homicide detective on active duty. But while he was still a vampire, if anything ever happened to him would she ever know? Or would he just disappear into the darkness, without her knowing for certain if he'd moved on or if he'd been destroyed.

"What?" asked Nick softly.

Natalie shivered again and dropped his hand. She pushed her way past him hurriedly. "Nothing. Just . . . like someone just walked over my grave." It wasn't until she reached her desk that she realized why she was going there—the message from Eric Petrie. "I got—"

"Nat, there's—"

They'd spoken simultaneously, then stopped and looked at one another.

"Go ahead," said Natalie.

Nick shook his head and wandered over to the counter. "You first."

"Okay." She picked up the pink message slip and waved it at him. "I got a call from Eric Petrie. He's supposed to call back tonight."

"That's not good." Nick walked over to her and took the paper from her.

She knew it said nothing, but his expression said a lot more. "How 'not good' is it?"

"Petrie's sister was brought across a year or two ago. From what I was told, she never broke contact with him, not completely."

"And . . . that's a no-no?"

Nick's smile was grim as he crumpled the paper in his hand, then tossed it into the wastebasket. "It leads to problems. Like this."

"I see." She bit her lip, thinking. "So what should I do? I'm all for playing dumb."

"I think that's the safest. I saw him today for a minute. I went in to check the Raven—just to see what was what," said Nick quickly, as she frowned and opened her mouth to comment. "Petrie was there. It turns out he's stalled the building inspectors until tomorrow, which means the arson crew won't get in until tomorrow morning at the earliest—"

"Which means you've got more time to get rid of things that might be a problem?" offered Natalie.

Nick met her eyes for a moment and smiled almost sheepishly. "Janette kept a good amount of stock on hand. It's being taken care of."

"Okay—that's one problem down." Natalie lowered herself into her chair, still watching Nick. "It sounds like Eric did us a favor. Maybe . . . maybe he's someone we can trust."

"We'll see. I don't think Miklos likes him."

"Oh, and that means he's on the ten most wanted list?"

"No, it's just that he seems to have good instincts. Janette used to trust him—" Nick cleared his throat and looked at her, hard.

Natalie endured the scrutiny for a few minutes, then asked, "Have I grown another nose or something?"

"It's what you just said—that Eric did *us* a favor."

Natalie shrugged. "He told me to call him 'Eric'—"

"Not that. The 'us.'" Turning, Nick seated himself on the edge of her desk and kicked his heel against the base. "LaCroix came by the loft, just before I left tonight."

"About Janette?" asked Natalie, then she held her breath when Nick paused.

He nodded once, slowly. "Yes."

There was another long pause, Nick seemed lost in thought as he stared across the room, seeing somewhere beyond that. "He wants . . . he wants me to find someone, to replace Janette."

"What?"

Nick looked down at her, then picked up the stapler from her desk and began toying with it, bending it at the hinge. "He wants me to find someone to replace Janette."

"I heard you. I just—it doesn't make any sense." Natalie shook her head. "He was her master, wasn't he? Was there a problem between them? Didn't he care—?"

"I think he cared too much. Maybe he's trying to prove to himself that it doesn't matter. I don't know—I don't think I'll ever know exactly what he's thinking." Nick placed the stapler down on the desk again. "LaCroix wants me to choose someone for him to bring across. He says he wants to maintain the 'balance.'"

"The . . . balance." Natalie swallowed. "You've told him you won't do it." When he looked away, she reached up and touched his shoulder. "Nick, you can't."

"I don't have any choice," he said softly. Claspng his hands together, he stared down at them.

"Of course you have a choice. You *always* have a choice."

"Not this time. If I don't choose, he'll make the choice." He raised his head and met her eyes. "In fact, he's already chosen."

She didn't like the look in his eyes and liked even less the implication of what he was saying. "But I thought from what you'd said, before you bring someone across there has to be consent, freely given?"

"It all depends on how you ask the question." Nick looked away from her. "If you phrase the question the right way, under the right circumstances, there's only one answer."

Nodding, Natalie sat back in her chair, stunned. He was right. She didn't want to become a vampire and she *certainly* didn't want LaCroix to bring her across and become her master. But if push came to shove and she was fighting for her life . . . would death be preferable as long as she could hope to find a cure?

"I've got twenty-four hours," said Nick, still staring down at his hands. "I've called in sick. I have to start looking for someone to replace Janette."

For a moment, Natalie simply stared at him—he was serious. "Looking . . . how? What are you looking for?"

"Someone who could use a second chance. Someone without family, alone. Someone who . . ." He stopped, looked across the room again, and shook his head to dispel the image.

Natalie wondered what it was or who it was that he saw, what memories haunted him. Was he thinking of what had happened to her brother, Richard? "How can you tell that it'll work. That it won't go wrong like—" The words froze on her lips as he looked at her and she averted her eyes. She still felt guilty about having browbeaten Nick into bringing her brother across. And then when Richard had gone mad and begun killing in the name of 'justice,' it was Nick who'd had to control him, Nick who'd had to destroy him.

He reached out to touch her chin, turning her face toward him. "You *never* know," he said softly. "Not until it's too late." Then he released her and slid off the desk. "There's someone out there I can help. I've got twenty-four hours to find them."

Natalie rose to her feet and followed him to the door. "Nick—maybe I could—?"

He waited, then turned to face her. "No. Let me try." Nick lifted his hand, caressing her cheek lightly with his fingers. "Let me see what I can find. Okay?"

The door closed softly behind him. Natalie leaned on it and took a deep breath. There was a part of her that wanted to rage at LaCroix for doing this, for putting Nick, *and* her, in this position. He had no right to take control of her life in this way. And she'd fight him every step, tooth and nail, if it came down to it.

But there was also another part of her that wondered what it would be like, to awaken to a world of darkness, where sensing heat was part of seeing, where the sound of a mortal heartbeat pounded in your ears, where blood meant food and life and so much more

It wasn't the thought of what might happen to her that frightened her. It was the thought that she just, very possibly, might enjoy it.

CHAPTER TEN

Even before the fire, the exterior of the Raven had been bleak and forbidding, the only sense of life being the neon lights that show through the torn canvas canopy at the front and the bouncer on duty who turned away vampire or mortal with little more than a whim. But now it looked like an ancient ruin, the brick face blackened and the door propped up, boards nailed across it.

Nick walked over to the entrance. Standing on the sidewalk in front of it, he stared with a sense that if he looked hard enough, it would all change back the way that it had been. But it didn't.

Stepping forward, he pulled the police tape from the door, then ducked beneath the boards covering most of the entrance.

The interior was much the same as it had been that morning, although somehow seemed even less welcoming—he attributed that to the fact that the sun wasn't shining brightly outside, waiting to burn him to a crisp. Standing at the twisted railing above the stairs, he swept the place with his senses, but it was silent. The others had come and gone, removing the blood and any personal items that had survived the fire. The scene was empty of any vampiric influence. When the arson team came through in the morning, the only clues they'd discover would be about who'd set the fire and why.

That seemed less important to him, somehow. One step at a time, Nick made his way down to the dance floor, then over to what remained of the bar—a large section of the counter was broken near the sink and had fallen in upon itself. The remains of melted glass formed pebbles that he kicked out of the way, until he stood at the bar. He rested his hand on a section of intact countertop and thought of the times he'd met Janette here, of what she'd said and what he'd said and how she'd smiled.

He was going to miss her.

"Oh, Janette, what am I going to do?" he asked softly. How could he replace her, his friend and lover?

LaCroix had told him to choose someone. No matter how he chose, or who, there was no guarantee. Just as he'd said to Natalie, there was no way of knowing what the beast could manage when unleashed within a mortal soul. Richard had been stable, honest, a man who'd dedicated his life to justice . . . and he'd become a murdering vigilante, glorying in bloodlust. He'd cured Elizabeth to save her life and return her beauty and she'd focused on vanity and revenge, killing without mercy. How could he know who would become his friend, a student he'd be proud to teach, who'd take advantage of longevity to promote peace and art and study rather than bloodless and violence?

There was no way of knowing what would come of this. He had only one certainty—that he wasn't going to let LaCroix bring Natalie across.

That, at least, was a comfort. No matter who he chose or why, he'd have to leave this life and her and possibly Toronto behind. But she'd be safe from the vampire world into which he'd dragged her, safe from LaCroix, safe from . . . himself.

Nick looked up, hearing someone at the door to the raven—a mortal heartbeat. He moved suddenly and quietly, across the floor and up the steps, to one side of the door.

It was Eric Petrie, the fireman's helmet and protective clothing having been replaced by an Irish knit sweater and jeans. He stood in the door, then started when he saw Nick. A slow smile crept across his lips. "I thought I might run into you here."

"And what gave you that idea?" asked Nick sharply.

Petrie shrugged. "Just a hunch." He turned and looked out over the club, much as Nick had done earlier. "The place looks dead. And I guess it is now. Although I guess someone will come through and renovate it. Give it a new name, new coat of paint, new music . . . and the crowds will come."

"Sounds like you've had some experience with this."

"Nothing ever really dies. It always comes back. Might be a little bit different, but it always comes back." Petrie wiped his mouth with his fist, then dug his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "You got any family, Knight? Brother or sisters?"

Nick started, thinking first of Janette, his gaze going to the burned and abandoned bar, and then of Fleur. When he looked up, he found Petrie watching him, studying him. He smiled, grimly. "A sister. But she's gone."

"Gone." Petrie nodded. "Me, too. Funny how we say that—gone. Not 'dead.' Just . . . gone. It's like we can't let go."

"It's important to let go. You have to, or things can't change." Nick gestured at the interior of the club. "Like you said, in a year or two, this place will be filled with dancers again. It'll be different, but different isn't bad just . . . different. That's the way it works."

"I used to think that, too. But maybe I don't believe that any more." Petrie walked forward and gripped the twisted iron rail at the top of the steps, then looked down at the charred flakes of paint that clung to his fingers. "You care for somebody, you love them, you raise them . . . I say they owe you. I say that you don't have to let them go. Ever. You hang on for everything you're worth, no matter how hard they fight you, even if they take you down on the way. That's the right way of things. That's what family's about."

Nick swallowed and looked across the club, fighting the desire to counter Petrie's words. He'd been under LaCroix's control for all of those centuries, in one way or another. And still was, to some extent. "And what about the people you care for, the people you want to hang onto?" he asked sharply. "Don't they have a right to live their own lives? How long do you have to control them? Until you destroy them or they give in?"

Bowing his head, brushed his hands together, wiping away the bits of flaking paint. "I guess that's what it comes down to, isn't it? Either they give in or you give in. Guess I'm not the sort who gives in easily." Petrie turned and walked back to the door, then stopped and glanced over his shoulder. "Put back the crime scene tape when you're done, huh? Can't have every sightseer in Toronto wandering through here before my team shows up tomorrow, can we?"

Nick didn't answer. He waited in the shadows, listening as Petrie's steps echoed on the concrete. It was only when he heard a car engine start and the car pull away that he relaxed.

And even then, he was on edge. Standing in the darkness, he realized that he'd come here looking for answers . . . but there was nothing here but ashes and old memories.

Very old memories.

Nicholas opened the door to the salon and was about to walk in when Janette danced up to him, her stole swirling behind her as she moved. "Look, Nicola! Isn't it lovely? I've never seen anything like them, at least not in centuries."

The diamond earrings she held between her fingers were delicate, but worth a king's ransom, only outdone by the shape and cut of the stones set in a necklace that dripped from one of her cupped palms like frozen droplets of rain.

He was impressed, but enjoyed her smile and the joy she exuded even more. Giving her a quick kiss on the cheek, he whispered, "They're lovely. But not half as lovely as you."

Janette shot him a quick glance, but still smiled. "Trite, but I never turn down a compliment. Oh, wait till

I have them on! I'll be right down."

Nicholas turned and watched as she ran across the foyer of their rented house, decorum lost to excitement as she dashed up the stairs, calling for her maid. They'd look beautiful on her.

But some of his pleasure was lost as he finally entered the room and found LaCroix standing by a table by the lamp, examining an empty jewel box. Closing it with a snap, he placed the jewel box back on the table. "I hope you don't mind—I bought them for her to celebrate my victory."

Quickly, Nicholas closed the doors. "Our bargain isn't over," he said sharply.

"Isn't it? And I assumed that Janette hadn't agreed to leave me." Picking up the boxes, LaCroix looked at them with a mocking frown. "I hope that these weren't premature. I hate to think what her next extravagant whim will cost me."

"The money means nothing to you," snarled Nicholas. He threw himself into a chair and folded his arms, staring at the empty fireplace.

"On the contrary—it means a great deal." The boxes were dropped to the table. One fell to the floor, bouncing across the carpet until it was barely an inch from Nicholas's foot. "This is a new world, Nicholas. Wealth has always been a universal language, but now it seems to speak more loudly than ever. Our safety if purchased by my nest-egg."

"Just as you purchase Janette's loyalty with necklaces and earrings?" He kicked at the box, slipping the toe of his boot beneath one end and sending it into the cold grate. "I was a fool to bargain with you. Of course she'd never leave you—you treat her like a queen! She's tied to you by gowns and jewels and estate houses. She'd be a fool to leave all this behind. What have I to offer her?"

"I think," said LaCroix in a cold tone. "That you underestimate her. And me."

"Do I?" Nicholas waved his hand in LaCroix's direction. "Forget our bargain. It was a cheat from the start. I had no chance of winning when you're capable of buying her devotion."

Walking to the fireplace, LaCroix lifted the jewelry box from the grate, then brushed the soot from it methodically. "No—don't dismiss it quite yet. Perhaps you're right, perhaps our playing field has been a trifle . . . uneven." He glanced at Nicholas, the edges of his lips curling slightly as if in a tight smile. "You shall have one more chance, Nicholas; I'll allow you one more attempt at turning Janette's affections from me."

He sighed in disgust and opened his mouth to complain yet again, but LaCroix was suddenly standing beside his chair. He thrust the jewelry box into Nicholas' hands and said, "By tomorrow I shall even things even to your satisfaction. And then . . . we will see."

There was something in LaCroix's manner, cold and deliberate, that gave him pause. So Nicholas merely met his master's eyes and nodded in agreement.

"Good." LaCroix stalked to the door of the salon, then turned. "And *try* to be polite about the jewelry. They're gaudy, I know, but it's just a phase. It will pass. And they *do* suit her."

Nick wondered what had happened to those earrings and the necklace? He didn't remember Janette ever selling them. Perhaps they were still in her collection . . . wherever that might be.

He realized then that he might never find her jewelry, or the things she prized the most and kept hidden away, because he had no idea where to look. There were friends on the continent, of course, other vampires who might know where Janette had stashed this or that trinket or token in her travels . . . but the only ones he could bring to mind were friends they'd had in common, and he had few of those among vampires these days.

When he thought about it, Nick realized that he knew little of Janette's current or recent history. And even beyond that, he had some idea of what music she preferred or disliked, which style of art caught her fancy and which she treated with disdain . . . but it was all the result of offhand comments or passing fancies.

There wasn't a lot that he really *knew* about her. Odd, but he'd never really paid that much attention to such things in the eight hundred years they'd spent together.

And now it was too late.

He walked along the sidewalk, heading in no particular direction, and heard a radio that was sitting in an open window.

The Nightcrawler was speaking.

"—Passes so quickly, gentle listeners. Hours to days, to months to years—they slip beyond your reach like a passing breeze, barely noticed. Until one day you awaken in a strange world and find yourself surrounded by strangers. Perhaps you had been friends, once. But your attention has wandered over time. And when you look at them again, they're not the people you knew. In fact, you discover how little you knew about them. You might just as well be bitter enemies or stranger in a crowd, for all they mean to you."

But that's the nature of things. Friends and acquaintances pass away. Only family remains."

There are some that say that you are given your family, but choose your friends. They're wrong. You can always choose your family. In fact, you must. Over time, only blood will tell—"

Nick had never actually counted the number of streets in Toronto, especially those where the hopeless and downtrodden gathered in search of a handout or a quick customer, or an easy victim. He walked down as many as he could find, watching the faces as he passed.

A few were familiar—snitches and petty thieves, hookers who'd become regulars on the vice raids and had all but taken up residence at the station. He passed them slowly, studying the faces, looking for some sign, for qualities of which LaCroix would approve.

That they were here indicated a will to survive, at any cost. It was a point in their favor. Some were too young, others too old. Many could be dismissed at a glance, too common for LaCroix's tastes, or too dull.

LaCroix had been right, in that. He knew what his master would find appealing in a companion. Or, at least, he thought he did. Thinking of Janette made the matter difficult. She'd been his companion and his lover and his friend, his nemesis and his savior. She'd had a sharp mind and a careful eye, a love of beauty and a certain vanity about her own appearance. She'd been strident and yet diplomatic, demanding but yielding at times . . . a contradiction in all things and yet in all things direct and exact and permanent. She'd been Janette.

And nothing more, nor less, would suit.

He flew, between streets, and when that proved fruitless, he wandered the halls of the homeless shelters, then the hospital wards where the terminal and the indigent could be found. So many faces, so many eyes . . . and so many with a spark that gazed back at him, life denying the inevitable closure of death, holding to that tiny bit of light and fighting even as it slipped from their grasp.

There was one woman, a cancer patient. He stood at the foot of her bed while she slept and he watched her. Her face was sunken, her head covered with a bandanna, hair missing from the chemo treatments. There were so many wires and tubes attached to her, she looked like a puppet whose master had left, hanging free but not free, at ease and yet compelled by gravity to bend this way or that.

It was her breathing that fascinated him, the rattle deep within her throat, the struggle to fill the lungs one more time, then once again. By all rights she should have been dead, but even in sleep she still breathed, still fought.

What had her life been like? Did she have family or friends? Children and a home? A career? Had she gone to school? Was she an artist? A florist? A teacher? A secretary? A doctor? Who had she been?

An hour before dawn, he heard the rattle change to something more desperate. Moving to her bedside, he was there when her eyes opened in panic, her body stiffening and shifting even within the controlling cocoon of tubes as she tried to breath, but couldn't.

Nick placed his hand over her own, over the tube that fed from her wrist.

She saw him. Her eyes narrowed slightly, as if wondering who he was, who this stranger might be.

"If you see Janette," he whispered. "Tell her that I loved her."

The woman smiled, her lips parting slightly. And then rattle in her lungs fell still and silent, as her heart gave a last, final beat.

The machine beside her bed began to shriek as the heart monitor fell into a solid, even line. A nurse ran into the room, throwing the partially opened door against the wall. Nick stepped back into the shadows, unseen at first, then later accepted as part of the melee of doctors and nurses and equipment that all seemed to tumble into the room together, a one ring circus of life.

But the woman was gone. She'd been gone long before they'd entered, long before they'd closed the lids that rested above sightless eyes, gone from the instant her lips had opened and that last, final breath had escaped.

Nick left the room as quietly as he'd entered, still ignored by the busy staff, and wondered if she'd heard what he'd said. And if she'd find Janette whenever she got to where she was going.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Twenty minutes and her shift was over.

For the hundredth time that evening, Natalie stared at the phone, daring it to ring . . . and fearing that it might. She tried Nick's loft and his cell-phone a few times, but there'd been no answer. Another time, she might have even tried the Raven.

Of course, *that* was no longer an option.

The folder in front of her was routine, a suspicious death that turned out to be nothing more exotic than a heart attack brought on by—from a glance at the contents of the man's dietary tract—a penchant for cheese steaks and beer. She filled out the information carefully, but kept finding herself distracted, glancing again and again at the phone. She wanted to know what Nick had found, or who Nick had found, or if he'd thought of a way out of this or—

But the phone hadn't rung. It had been a quiet evening, with no new 'deposits' for the cooler or deaths to investigate. A run-of-the-mill, paperwork only kind of shift.

She was very slowly going out of her mind.

When the phone finally rang, Natalie jumped. She stared at it—the phone had *never* been that loud before. In the middle of the second ring she picked up the receiver, knowing from the number and tone of the buzz that the call was from an outside line and not just Grace, wanting to chat because it was *really* quiet and she wanted to chat.

"Coroner's Office, Dr. Lambert speak—"

"Dr. Lambert, this is Eric Petrie. We met this morning, at the Raven fire?"

Natalie's breath caught in her throat for a moment. "Um—yes. Right. What can I do for you, Inspector?"

"There was something I wanted to ask you. I know you must be heading off shift now—could I meet you tomorrow evening?"

"I have a late shift tomorrow night," said Natalie cautiously. "I don't know—"

"It'll just take a few minutes. I was down at the Raven tonight—just checking to make sure there wasn't any vandalism—and there was a police detective there. I think his name was 'Knight'? He's from Homicide."

Natalie took a deep breath and hoped her voice didn't shake. "Yeah. He's with Homicide. I've worked with him on a few cases."

"Have you? Good." There was a pause, then Petrie added, "Could you spare me a few minutes tomorrow night, say about eightish?"

"Eightish." Natalie scribbled the time on the notepad on her desk—she thought she was doing pretty well. "Where would you like to meet?"

"At the Raven, if you don't mind. My people should be through with it by then and there's something there that I'd like you to take a look at."

"All right, Inspector. Eight, at the Raven, tomorrow night."

"Thank you, Dr. Lambert. I appreciate your help. I'll see you then."

Natalie hung up the phone, then bit the eraser of the pencil in her hand. *That* was odd. Why had Nick been down at the Raven tonight? And why had Eric Petrie been there—that story about wanting to keep the

scene clear didn't wash. If he'd been concerned about that he'd have gotten some uniforms from the police department to post a guard.

Then again, if *she* knew something about vampires and she was pretty sure she was the only person who knew and then she stumbled across someone who might know a whole lot more . . . yeah, she'd be pretty cautious, too. If they met at the scene and she didn't know anything about vampires, Eric could always pass it off as a bad joke, ask her some routine questions about the fire—she'd been there, after all—and that would be that.

The question was, what would she tell him?

What could she tell him?

Natalie picked up the phone and dialed the loft number. She waited the requisite number of rings and then the answering machine came on. "Nick? This is Nat. Eric Petrie called. He's asked me to meet him tomorrow night at the Raven, about eight. I think he's looking to make contact, find someone who understands. I think I should be there. Um . . . give me a call, all right?"

She hung up quickly, before she could say more.

And what more could she say? Ask him if he'd found someone to deliver to LaCroix, a replacement for Janette? That would lead to all sorts of questions that she really *didn't* want answered. What if Nick didn't find someone? He'd saved her from LaCroix once before, but lightening didn't strike twice in the same place . . . neither her luck nor Nick's was ever that good. What could she do to protect herself, short of high-tailing it out of Toronto on the next flight out of town?

The hands of the clock moved slowly, one audible click at a time. Natalie counted the seconds between the minutes and wondered how much time she really had left.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Nick shifted and was awakened by the a thud, followed by a brief crash. Warily, he pulled himself upright and another empty bottle shifted on the sheets—but this one he caught and placed on the nightstand before it could hit the floor.

Some inner sense told him that it was dark outside, that the world was once again safe for him to walk. Another inner sense—a much more common inner sense—and a pounding headache reminded him that maybe he'd had a bit too much to drink when he'd arrived back at the loft last night. Wiping his hand across his face, he vaguely remembered putting away at least one bottle of cow's blood before breaking into a bottle of human blood mixed with wine that Janette had given him as a gift not too long ago. There'd been a logical reason behind it, but he couldn't quite come up with it at the moment.

Swinging his feet over the other side of the bed, he stood upright and then groaned aloud. Maybe he'd had a few of the other bottles Janette had given him. There'd been some mixing, pouring the blood from glass to glass, adding more alcohol—

Now that's where he'd made his mistake.

In a sudden flash he saw the eyes of the dying woman, heard her final gasp for breath. That's what had set him off, sent him straight into the bottle. The blood alone was soothing, but only the wine mixed with it could dull the memories. And there were things he'd rather not remember just now.

Nick sighed and made his way carefully across the bedroom. If it was dark, there'd probably be twenty messages from Schanke on his machine, wanting to know about his car. He'd never checked back with Artie, so Schanke's car was still at the shop. He'd been too busy trying to find someone.

Someone to replace Janette.

He paused, on hand on the doorknob of the bedroom, trying to remember exactly what time LaCroix had been by last evening. He'd been given twenty-four hours to find someone for LaCroix to bring across, to maintain this all-important 'balance' he kept harping about. It would be just like LaCroix to give him twenty-four hours and not a minute longer.

Which meant he had to find someone, fast.

And he had to find Natalie.

Cursing his stupidity, Nick dressed as quickly as he could, throwing on whatever clothing came to hand. On one pass through the bedroom he forgot to avoid the glass scattered across the floor and walked through it, stopping only as the slivers sliced into his flesh.

He half-hopped, half-fell onto the bed, the satin sheets slipping out from beneath him. Taking a breath, Nick concentrated on removing the slivers of glass from his soles. They were easy enough to spot even in the gloom of his unlit bedroom—translucent shards outlined with the slightest edge of red. He pulled out one large piece and the cut healed over almost instantly . . . which gave him a much better idea of exactly how much blood he'd consumed on his return to the loft last evening.

Oddly enough, the thought comforted, as he dug out another shard of glass. If he was going to fight with LaCroix to save Natalie—and it could come to that—he was in a better position than he'd been in almost a year. The blood would make him stronger and more alert.

Not that it would help. LaCroix was far older than he, and far stronger. He'd never beaten LaCroix by

brute strength and there was little chance of his winning this time, if he didn't have another edge. Digging out the last bit of glass, Nick had to admit that LaCroix had relied more on threats of violence than actual, physical displays.

There had, of course, always been exceptions.

He'd heard the shrieks and screams as he rode up to the estate house. Nicholas dismounted and glanced up at the windows of the house. There were few candles lit in the windows, but the most likely place for the source of the sound seemed to be the salon.

The servants seemed nowhere to be found. Abandoning his horse to his own devices, Nicholas ran up the steps of the house and into the foyer. By the time he reached the salon doors, he heard a loud 'thwack,' followed by another scream.

He was stunned by his first sight of the room—tables and chair were overturned and broken, the pieces scattered around like broken toothpicks. Janette was huddled near the fireplace, clinging to the stone support at the base, sobbing hysterically. Her dress was torn and her hair has fallen from its fastenings. There was a livid purple bruise on her shoulder and a long red gash down her arm, neither of which were healing.

"What have I done?!" she screamed, between sobs. "Tell me, what have I done!"

It was then that he saw LaCroix standing by the window. LaCroix looked up at him, his expression grim, then turned his attention back to Janette. In two strides he was across the room. Grabbing a fistful of her hair, he hauled her to her feet, then he slapped her hard, across the face.

"Enough!" roared Nicholas. Grabbing hold of LaCroix's shoulders, he broke his grip on Janette's hair. Eyes gold, Nicholas pushed LaCroix back against the wall with one shove and when LaCroix moved as if to avoid him, pushed again and stood closer, pinning LaCroix's shoulders to the wall with his hands. "Enough!" he cried again. "Do you want to kill her?"

LaCroix's eyes were red, his fangs extended to their full length. As Nicholas held him, he closed his eyes and turned his head, as if regaining his composure.

Believing that LaCroix was no longer a threat, Nicholas released him, throwing him back against the wall once more for good measure, then knelt down by Janette. Her injuries were far more extensive than he had first thought—she cradled her arm to her chest awkwardly, as if to protect it. Her nose was bent and her face bloody, one eye swelling black, her cheeks covered in scratches as she glared at LaCroix through the tangle of her hair. "What . . . have . . . I . . . done?" she asked, between broken sobs. "Tell me. Tell me!"

Nick put a hand to the back of her head, afraid to touch her—she seemed to be covered in blood and bruises. "Ssh! Ssh! Janette—"

For the first time, she looked at him, suddenly realizing that he was there. "Nicola?" she asked, voice breaking.

He wasn't prepared for what happened next—Janette pushed him over, hard, then hobbled from the room, still sobbing. Nick scrambled to his feet in an attempt to go after her, but he felt a firm pressure on his arm, holding him in place.

LaCroix.

Trying to shrug off the grip proved futile, but he managed to turn and placed his wrists around LaCroix's, pinning him in place as well. "What have you done?"

LaCroix was staring out the door of the salon. "I've given you your opportunity. Another moment, Nicholas. Give her a chance to collect herself."

Finally, the grip of LaCroix's fingers loosened. Nicholas pulled away, almost falling again, but caught himself. He rose to his feet and pointed down at the mess. "My opportunity? I never asked for this."

LaCroix's eyes were cold and distant as he met Nicholas's gaze. "No? You complained that I'd pur-

chased Janette's loyalty, that I spoiled her." He gestured toward the door. "I've leveled the field for you, as I'd promised. Go ask her now, Nicholas. Ask Janette if she'll leave me."

He stumbled toward the door, then turned to face LaCroix, who hadn't moved so much as a muscle. "You're mad," he whispered in disbelief. "How could you do this to her? Why would you do this?"

"Ah, Nicholas, you still don't understand." There was a hint of a smile on LaCroix's lips. "To prove a point, I suppose. But mostly . . . because you asked."

He'd turned and run from the room, the scent of blood still heavy in the air, fleeing LaCroix's words and that knowing, gloating smile.

The last bits of glass removed, Nick finished dressing and headed for the stairs. He had no idea what he was going to do, no plan . . . and yet he had to come up with something. Kicking aside the empty green glass bottles in his way, he walked to the phone, intending to call Natalie at home . . . or at work.

A glance at the clock caused him to groan again—it was almost eight. The light blinking on his answering machine meant that he'd had at least eight messages and he bet half of those were from Schanke about the car. Hitting the play button, Nick turned to the table to retrieve his watch from the box where he'd kept it—

"Nick? This is Nat. Eric Petrie called. He's asked me to meet him tomorrow night at the Raven, about eight. I think he's looking to make contact, find—"

Petrie? Nat was meeting Petrie at the Raven?

A cold chill went down his spine. Nick headed for the elevator at a run. He hadn't spoken to Natalie about his conversation with Petrie—there was definitely something not right about the man. The fact that he wanted to meet Natalie in a deserted area only added fuel to his suspicions.

Once outside, he remembered that Schanke had his car. Nick took to the air, heading for the Raven. He didn't think Petrie would hurt Nat, but he didn't want to take any chances. And at least he knew where Natalie was.

Which put him one step ahead of LaCroix.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It wasn't the best part of town, even at eight in the evening. Natalie thought again about heading back to her car, rolling up the windows and locking the doors until Eric showed. She wasn't surprised that she hadn't heard from Nick. If he'd found . . . what he was looking for last night, he was probably busy making arrangements.

Although what kind of arrangements did you make for something like that? It wasn't like the other vampires would throw you a 'coming across' party. Nick hadn't gone into specifics, but she gathered from what he'd said that LaCroix was going to hold him to that twenty-four hour deadline, which meant that he probably had a lot to do.

Natalie decided that she could handle this herself. Sure, it wasn't *her* secret she was sharing, but Eric Petrie already knew that vampires existed and seemed to know that a number of them hung out at the Raven on a frequent basis. She'd steer the conversation away from Nick and keep everything as vague as possible until she could get a handle on what Petrie actually knew and what his intentions might be.

There was no sign of him.

She walked up and down the sidewalk, a hundred yards in either direction, then Natalie thought she heard something from inside the Raven. Ducking down, she peered through the criss-crossed boards nailed to the doorframe and the police tape stretched across it. "Inspector Petrie?" she asked, her voice echoing.

"In here."

The answer was faint, but more or less recognizable. Regretting the fact that she hadn't brought her car flashlight to light her, Natalie bent down and slipped into the darkened interior of the Raven.

"Back here," said Eric's voice. "By the bar. Watch your step on the way down."

Natalie hesitated on the upper landing and waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. She could make out basic shapes and more or less felt her way along the metal railing at the top of the steps, the burned paint flaking as she touched it. Wiping her hands lightly on her skirt, she decided she'd send Nick the dry-cleaning bill . . . if she ever saw him again.

The thought stopped her cold. If Nick found someone, it was very possible he and LaCroix and their new friend were off on their way to their new lives somewhere. That could be why Nick hadn't returned her calls—he could have left. She wouldn't put it past him to slip out without so much as a good-bye, to spare her feelings, of course. It was her impression that he'd never really gotten very good at good-bye.

"Dr. Lambert?"

"I'm here," she said, then glanced around at the echo. Natalie took one hesitant step forward, then another, making her way through the debris.

A light shone at the bar—the round circle of a flashlight. "Here, let me help you," said Eric.

Natalie accepted his hand over a fallen beam gratefully and the flashlight did wonders for her morale. "Thanks." She glanced around, the burned club interior seeming even more threatening when shadowed by the flashlight. "I can't say I like your choice of meeting places."

"It was necessary, believe me." Petrie gestured at the club surrounding them with his flashlight. "I wanted to ask you what you knew about this place, if there were any secret passages or hidden compartments or anything."

"Secret passages?" Natalie tried hard not to smile and failed. "I told you, I've only been here a couple of

times. I don't know anything about—"

"But you know about the vampires."

Natalie swallowed—boy, they'd moved right onto the tough topics, hadn't they? "Yes," she admitted, after a pause. And then she stopped there, not knowing what else to say.

"I thought so." Petrie dropped the flashlight to the bar, but she didn't need to see his face—his self-satisfied smile was evident in his tone. "Knight knows about them, too, doesn't he?"

So much for keeping Nick out of the conversation.

"We've worked together on Homicide cases," said Natalie slowly. "I don't know what—"

"It doesn't matter." Petrie moved closer to her. "I wanted to talk to you because I figured you might help me. My sister . . . she's one of them."

Natalie hesitated, not wanting to let on how much she really knew. "Your sister is a vampire?"

"Yeah. I've been trying to find her for two years, but they keep moving her around town. I finally figured out this was the place to go—lots of late-night shipments, not a lot of activity during the day. I was hoping that she was staying here. Thought the fire might flush her out into the open."

"You thought—" Natalie cleared her throat. "<You> set the fire?"

"Fire's what I know best. Minimal damage, make it look like an amateur, keep the pros away from the scene as long as possible . . ." She heard Petrie sigh. "Look, I made sure no one got hurt. A little singed around the edges, maybe."

No one got hurt . . . he didn't know about Janette. And maybe she'd made a few assumptions—like people who knew about vampires didn't necessarily feel obliged to protect them. Wishing like hell that she'd waited until Nick had called her back, Natalie edged away from Petrie. "Can we move this conversation outside? This place gives me the willies. Is this place even safe? That ceiling could come down any minute—"

He caught her arm, holding her there. "Just give me a chance, Dr. Lambert. All I want is for you to ask a few questions about my sister, see what you hear, okay?"

"*Not* okay," said a female voice from behind them. "*Definitely* not okay."

Before Petrie could pick up his flashlight, a candle flared to life on the dance floor. The girl who held it could have been more than seventeen or eighteen, her blonde hair pulled back in a pony tail, her flesh pale against a black tank top and spandex slacks with saddle straps. She walked toward them through the mess easily, not even breaking stride.

"Pammy?" asked Eric Petrie. He took a step toward the woman, but she slapped his hand away from her and he let out a sharp cry.

"Don't 'Pammy' me, you bastard! You've got some nerve! First you try to kill me, then when I get away from you, you try to kill me again?" The young woman turned her gaze to Natalie. "Sorry about that, Dr. Lambert. I didn't want to get you mixed up in this. But after what Eric pulled it, shadowing him was the only thing I could think of." She turned toward the dance floor. "You heard him. Is that good enough for you guys?"

There was a series of murmurs from the darkness, then other flames flared, shining brightly. The flickers revealed the presence of a number of other vampires, Miklos at the forefront.

Natalie backed away instinctively, but suddenly Miklos was beside her. He placed his arm around her waist and drew her back, away from Petrie. "If you would wait outside, Dr. Lambert—"

"I don't think so." Ill at ease and surrounded by vampires, Natalie picked up the flashlight from the bar and slipped away from Miklos, drawing closer to Eric Petrie. "Miklos, what is this? What's going on?"

"It's called a lynch mob, I believe," said LaCroix. Standing just on the other side of the bar, he deftly reached across took the flashlight from Natalie's grip easily, although she tried her best to hold onto it.

"Although Nicholas extracted some sort of promise from Miklos about proceeding with 'justice' rather than 'vengeance'?" He arched an eyebrow and gave a slightly disgusted look in Miklos direction. "Which is why this farce had to take place. Mr. Petrie, there, just confessed to committing arson. And, by extension, murder."

"Murder?" asked Petrie. He stared at LaCroix, then met Natalie's eyes. "But . . . there was no one in here. I left the back clear so they could get out—I was sure of it."

"You screwed up," said Pammy, her ponytail bobbing as she jerked her head to one side. "And you killed one of us. And not just *any* one of us. You killed someone who had a lot of friends around here."

"But I did it to find you, Pammy." Eric Petrie's voice shook as he turned to her. "That's all I wanted, was to find you and tell you I wanted to see you again. We're family."

"Did it ever occur to you that I didn't *want* to be found?" she asked sharply. "That I kept moving because I wanted to avoid you? That I started hanging out on the streets because I couldn't take your crap any more? I couldn't stand your over-bearing, blowhard, patron—patron—"

"Patronizing?" offered LaCroix.

"Thanks." Pammy shot him a grin, then turned to face her brother again. "Patronizing . . . hell, Eric, you tried to kill me!"

"It was an accident, I swear! You needed heroin—I took it from a scene. I didn't know it was bad." Petrie turned his gaze to Natalie. "She was a junkie. She couldn't handle the programs, they weren't structured enough for her. Pam always needed discipline—she was a wild kid. I tried bringing her down cold turkey, but I thought she'd go into arrest."

"And you didn't know enough to score some smack from the guy at the corner?" said Pam disdainfully. She gestured at the vampires behind her. "If one of them hadn't found me when you panicked and ran off, I'd be dead now. Dead, Eric."

Eric Petrie was shaking. He reached out to her again. "Pam, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

Natalie grabbed his arm and pulled Petrie back, keeping him from moving within the circle of vampires. "Don't—" she warned.

"Really, Dr. Lambert, you're not thinking of trying to save him?" LaCroix clicked his tongue against his teeth as if in dismay. "He's a confessed arsonist. He's attempted murder . . . and succeeded once."

"That was an accident," said Natalie, drawing Eric Petrie closer to her. "Manslaughter—"

"*Murder*," he repeated. In the darkness, Natalie could see a red glow beginning to shine behind the gray of LaCroix's eyes. His bantering tone of a moment before was gone. "Murder of my daughter. Murder of *Janette*."

There was a low murmur from the crowd of vampires at her name. Natalie glanced around, but couldn't find a sympathetic face. "He's a mortal," she said, then cleared her throat when her voice wavered. "He should be tried in a mortal court."

"For murdering a vampire?" asked LaCroix. He shook his head, still playing to the crowd. "I think not, Doctor."

The noise from the crowd was growing louder and they were moving closer, drawing abreast of Pam. Beginning to realize just how many were there, Natalie looked back at Eric Petrie. Yes, he was an arsonist, but she couldn't leave him to the mercy of the vampires. "I'm not going to let you kill him," Natalie announced, pleased to find that her voice didn't break.

"Oh, yeah?" Pam took a step toward her. "And you're going to stop us?"

Miklos was suddenly between them. He stood in front of Natalie, facing off the crowd. "She's right. He's a mortal criminal; he should be tried in a mortal court."

"What about what he did to me?" demanded Pammy. "They put him in jail, he's out in two years, and

then he starts chasing me around again? Sorry, Miklos, I don't think so."

"Then he should be made to forget you. You died, Pamela." He glanced over his shoulder at Natalie. "If he believes that you've died, that he's lost his hold on you, you'll be free of him." When Natalie nodded slightly, Miklos turned back to Pammy. "He's your only family, Pamela—your blood line dies with him. Kill him, and your family has no mortal future. It rests with you. Are you willing to take that responsibility?"

Pammy shifted from one foot to the other, then her gaze went past Miklos, to her brother. "No. You're right. I don't want him dead."

Natalie breathed a sigh of relief.

"But I *do*," said LaCroix quietly. When Miklos turned to say something more, LaCroix held up his hand, silencing him. "He's killed Janette. She was mine; he had no right to take her from me. I want justice." He met Natalie's eyes. "I want recompense."

She realized then what was happening—LaCroix was letting her play right into his hands. He'd known Nick wasn't going to find a replacement for Janette, but if he forced her into being brought across, he'd have broken some vampire rule or something. So he'd resorted to blackmail.

"What do you want?" she asked, meeting his gaze.

For a moment, LaCroix smiled—she saw in his expression that he was pleased that she'd figured it out. "I assume you've spoken to Nicholas."

"Yes."

"Then you know what I want."

"Consent, freely given? And Eric goes free?"

LaCroix's smile disappeared. "Yes."

"What?" asked Petrie. "Dr. Lambert, what's going on?"

She shushed him, whispering, "Shut up. I'm trying to save your life, okay?" Turning back to LaCroix, she asked, "How do I know you'll keep your word?"

"Dr. Lambert, I *always* keep my word. Ask anyone here."

Natalie glanced around the room and found the number of downcast eyes less than heartening. She paused at Miklos. "Will you get him out of here and to the police?"

"Yes. And I'll make certain he remembers nothing."

"Good. Thanks." Taking a deep breath, Natalie turned back to LaCroix. "All right, you've got a deal."

She decided that her shaking was due more to the murmur of the crowd behind her than the reappearance of that victorious smile on LaCroix's lips.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Nick flew as fast as he could, whipping through the sky without an instant's hesitation. He didn't believe that Natalie was in immediate danger, but he couldn't take the chance. And the sooner he found her, the sooner he'd think of a way to keep her away from LaCroix. There had to be something LaCroix would be willing to settle for, something he had with which he could bargain.

But for the life of him, he couldn't think of a thing, except his freedom. And how better could LaCroix bind him more tightly than by bringing across Natalie? With her under his power, Nick would never feel safe leaving her alone with LaCroix. Not after what had happened with Janette . . .

He flown up the stairs to her room, but Janette had locked the door. Nicholas listened—he could hear her sobbing. “Janette? Janette, let me in, please?”

“Go away! Leave me alone, Nicola.”

Part of him wanted to do exactly what she said, to go away. But he realized that this was his fault, he'd underestimated LaCroix and Janette had suffered for it. The least he owed her was an explanation.

And there was *still* a chance he'd win his bargain with LaCroix . . . but not through a closed door.

“Please, Janette?” He rapped on the door again. “Let me see you just for a moment. I want to make certain that you'll be all right.”

“Leave me alone!” she shouted. After that, her sobbing seemed muffled, as if she'd covered her head with a pillow.

Nicholas grabbed the door handle and twisted, snapping the lock. He pushed the door inward to open it . . . and found something was barricading the door. Janette had taken no chances.

But she underestimated his strength. Moving back a few steps, Nicholas ran at the door, putting his full strength behind his shoulder. There was a crack like thunder and he fell into the room, the door swinging open and slamming against the opposite wall, the wardrobe that had been standing against the door falling to the floor and breaking in two.

Scrambling to his feet, Nicholas approached the bed. Janette was huddled at the headboard, a blanket wrapped completely around her, save for her undamaged eye. “You've seen me,” she said shakily. “I'm fine. Now go.”

“No. Not yet.” He sat down beside her and tried to remove the blanket to get a better idea of the extent of her injuries, but Janette held onto it fiercely. “No!” she cried. And then when he continued to tug at the coverlet, she turned her back to him, leaning her face against the wood of the headboard. “Please, Nicola, leave me. Please?”

Her voice was so pitiful it tore at his heart. “All right,” he answered. Placing his arms around her, Nicholas held her carefully, truly afraid that she might break in his grasp. “In a moment.”

She didn't protest after that, but continued to sob softly in his arms. “He wouldn't tell me why,” she cried. “What did I do, to deserve such treatment at his hands? What did I do? That's all I want to know. I must know. This must never happen again. *Never!*”

Nicholas placed a kiss on a small patch of skin that peeked out through an opening in the blanket. “Come away with me,” he whispered. “Come away with me, Janette. LaCroix cares nothing for you—you can see that now, can't you? He couldn't treat you this way if he *did* care. Come away with me?”

Her breath caught between sobs. For a moment he had hope that she might agree.

"I . . . cannot."

Nicholas' heart sank deep in his chest, but still he held her, rocking her slightly in his arms. "After he's treated you this way? You owe him *nothing*."

"I owe him *this*," she said sharply. "I owe him what I am."

The blanket slipped a bit more and Nicholas turned his back to the headboard so that she faced him. Janette pushed her hair to the side of her face that has suffered the most damage, concealing it within the folds of the blanket. She reached up her hand to touch his lips and he kissed her broken fingernails and bruised fingers lightly. "Janette—"

"No. Do not ask me again. I'll let you stay if you don't ask me again." She nodded, a strand of dark hair falling across her eye.

"All right," he agreed. "I won't ask."

"And . . . you'll stay?"

"For your sake, I'll stay." Nicholas drew her toward him carefully, holding her against his shoulder and comforting her. Something made him look up, at the doorway.

LaCroix stood there. Nicholas drew in a breath and shook his head slightly, a plea for LaCroix's silence. He bowed his head, then looked up again, acknowledging his defeat—he'd lost the bet and was willing to accept the consequences.

Nicholas fully expected LaCroix to smile or make some sign of victory. Instead, he bowed his head as well, then quietly closed the door. Stunned, Nicholas stared at the door in astonishment.

Then he felt Janette's fingers turning down his collar and her teeth sliding into the skin of his neck.

Nick broke through the pieces of wood that remained nailed over the door of the Raven and ripped the crime scene tape down with the swipe of his hand. He saw a number of vampires gathered together on the dance floor holding candles, forming a semi-circle around the bar, at the center of which was Miklos, Eric Petrie and Natalie on one side of the bar and LaCroix on the other.

Before another mortal heartbeat, he was at Natalie's side, his arm around her.

"It's too late, Nicholas," said LaCroix. He gestured toward the crowd of vampires. "They've heard her say it—consent, freely given."

Nick looked out and found a number of unfriendly faces. "What's going on?" he asked Natalie quietly. "What did you agree to?"

She ducked her head almost guiltily. "They were going to kill Petrie—he's the arsonist." When Nick turned his head quickly toward Petrie, Natalie placed a hand on his cheek to get his attention. "Nick—he didn't know Janette was here. He'd never intended to kill her. He was trying to find his sister."

"They've agreed to give him up to the mortal authorities," said Miklos. He nodded toward Petrie. "I'll make certain he believes his sister died some time ago. She'll be free of him. But he—" Miklos nodded toward LaCroix "—wants recompense, under the old law. Dr. Lambert has agreed to be brought across. And LaCroix will release his claim on Eric Petrie's life for the murder of Janette."

"I see." Nick took a deep breath and drew Natalie close to him. He pressed a kiss on her forehead and whispered, "Do me a favor—don't agree to *anything* ever again without a lawyer present."

Hope flickered in her eyes as she pulled back and looked up at him. "You've got a plan?"

"I've got a suspicion." Nick released Natalie and turned to Miklos. "You're willing to let Petrie go free, even though he murdered Janette?"

There was a flicker, a crack in that impenetrable wall that Miklos put up, then he glanced away. "He's accused of Janette's murder—nothing's been proven."

"And you're the one who wanted vengeance?" Nick smiled and turned toward LaCroix. "Kill him, then. I have a right to demand vengeance, under the old ways. Janette was part of my family. I say kill him."

"No!" protested Miklos quickly. He grabbed Nick's arm. "No. He's only been accused. You know the law. You asked me to prevent unjust bloodshed. Killing him would be wrong."

"Wrong? Why?" Nick met LaCroix's gaze. "Because you know he didn't kill Janette, don't you, Miklos? Because Janette isn't dead."

He was actually surprised when he saw a moment of shock on LaCroix's face—so he *didn't* know. This wasn't some Machiavellian scheme to pull him back to the fold. Unless . . . he'd guessed wrong?

But the set expression on Miklos features was another story entirely. Natalie moved closer to him, asking, "Nick? Janette's *not* dead? But I thought—?"

"So did I. I felt her burn. But something LaCroix said earlier started to make sense just now." He looked over at LaCroix. "We both felt her burn. But you said that she'd shut you out, that you'd never suspected that she might want to die alone."

"A paraphrase," said LaCroix, dismissing the discrepancies with a wave of his hand. "But essentially correct." Frowning, he said, "If this is some scheme to release you from your promise—?"

There *is* no promise if Janette's alive. And she must be—we never felt her die." Nick felt like crowing aloud. Instead, he smiled.

"Your evidence is circumstantial at best," protested LaCroix.

"If that's not enough—Miklos proves it." He clapped Miklos on the shoulder. "Miklos believes in the old ways, but he also believes in the new ones. If Petrie had caused Janette's death, Miklos would have been at his throat by now. But he won't let an innocent man die for a crime that wasn't committed."

"When did you figure this out?" whispered Natalie, leaning close to him.

Nick kissed her ear and answered, "Just now." Then he turned toward Miklos. "Where is she hiding? Tell me." When Miklos hesitated, he nodded toward LaCroix and said, "He won't believe it until he's seen Janette, you know that. You've saved Petrie, but do you want another's innocent blood on your hands?"

Miklos followed his gaze toward Natalie, then looked out over the crowd. Nodding, he said softly, "Yes—I'll take you to her. But not them. She doesn't want to be seen. The fire . . . she was injured."

Nick sobered under that news and glanced back at LaCroix. "How badly?"

"Enough." Miklos nodded toward Natalie. "She might be needed."

"I'll get my bag from the car." Natalie turned, then grabbed Nick's arm, getting his attention. She pointed toward Eric Petrie, who was talking quietly with his sister. "What about him?"

"She'll watch over him until I return," said Miklos.

Natalie was already on her way to the door and the other vampires were disappearing into the darkness, their flames of their candles being extinguished. Nick walked over to LaCroix and gestured toward the door. "Shall we go?"

To his credit and with no small amount of dignity, LaCroix walked around the end of the bar, then paused and allowed Nick past him, saying, "After you."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Natalie closed her eyes as she yawned. When she opened them, there was a bouquet of flowers on the desk in front of her. She blinked, then smiled.

Nick smiled down at her. Leaning his elbows on the desk, he asked, "And what's my favorite coroner doing after her shift lets out?"

"Your favorite coroner is going to get some well-deserved shut-eye . . . *after* she puts these in water." Natalie picked up the bouquet of daisies and geraniums and turned it in her hands. "Where do you find these things are two AM?"

"Ancient vampire secret," said Nick softly and winked.

She couldn't help but laugh. Then Natalie leaned down to sniff at the flowers. They smelled like sunshine. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, thinking of a spring morning. "I've gotta start a garden some day."

"What's stopping you?" Nick sat down on the edge of her desk and picked up the flowers from her hands, eyeing them carefully.

"Oh, a few things. Like the fact that I live in an apartment, the fact that anything green and in a pot spells t-o-i-l-e-t to Sydney, the fact that I'm always sleeping during the day so I'd never see them bloom . . ."

"There are flowers that bloom only at night," countered Nick.

"Yeah. But they're not daisies. And gimme those back—you'll break them." Natalie quickly grabbed back the bouquet just as Nick was attempting to bend a petal. "You're in a good mood," she noted, putting the flowers on the far side of her desk and away from his immediate reach.

"And why shouldn't I be? Schanke's car is fixed." He pulled his keys from his pocket and tossed them into the air, grinning. "I've got the Caddie back, without a scratch. Mancetti confessed to the Manning murder *and* another two outstandings on the books. And Cohen put through my two sick days without word one."

"Congratulations. I'm afraid things are still stacking up around here." Natalie tossed a file folder to one side and leaned back in her chair. "How's Janette?"

He hesitated, almost missing the keys. Nick quickly tucked them into his jacket pocket and left the desk, walking across the room. "Good. She says thanks, by the way. Don't be surprised if you find a package waiting for you some morning. I think she's going to give you something."

"Tell her anything but a mink coat—I wouldn't have anywhere to wear it and I'm not real fond of fur that doesn't purr or cough up hairballs."

Nick turned, grinning. "I'll be sure to tell her that."

"And what about LaCroix?" She gestured toward the radio behind her. "The Nightcrawler's been on taped repeat the past week."

"He's been spending time with Janette. The last I saw, they had their heads together about renovations to the Raven. Something to do with a sprinkler system. The club should be open again by next week."

"That soon?" asked Natalie, surprised. At Nick's shrug, she nodded knowingly. "Ah, money talks, huh?"

"In a language mortal and vampire alike understand." He turned away again, walking to the counter and

running his hand along the smooth surface. "Janette isn't pressing charge against Petrie for the damage to the club. The Crown Attorney said that, considering the confession, he'll be out in two to five with good behavior."

"Um, Nick?" Natalie cleared her throat. "That psychological counseling won't dig up any of his . . . you know, memories, will it?"

Nick shook his head, still engrossed in running his hand back and forth across the Formica countertop. "No. As far as Eric Petrie is concerned, his sister Pamela died two years ago. Miklos even set up a grave for her, with a stone. I'm told she visits quite often."

"She seems the type." Sighing, Natalie looked up, watching him. "So if everything's so great, what's eating you?"

"Me?" He stopped and looked over at her, then shrugged. "Nothing."

"Don't give me that." Natalie rose to her feet and walked over to him. She reached up to turn fix his collar, which had blown back over his jacket. "You've been riding around with the top down, haven't you?"

"What's the point in having a convertible if you don't let the top down every now and again?" he teased.

"Hmnn." She flattened his collar with her fingers. "I'm glad Janette's okay."

"Are you?"

"Yes." She met his eyes. "You realize we came out of this better than we had any right to expect to?"

"A little close?" he asked softly.

"A little *too* close. Although I'm not going to forgive Janette all that quickly for not telling you and LaCroix that she was still alive."

"She had her reasons."

Nick shrugged and tried to move away, but Natalie held onto his collar. "Considering how quickly you guys heal, a couple of third degree burns doesn't get her off the hook for the hell she put you through. Or the hell she almost put *me* through."

He raised his hand to her cheek and met her eyes. "Would you have gone through with it?"

"To save Eric's life?" Natalie looked away, toward the bulletin board. She'd asked herself that same question a hundred times in the past two weeks and she still didn't have an answer. "I don't know. I guess so. But if Janette had turned up alive afterwards . . ." She swallowed around the lump in her throat and met his eyes.

"I know," he said softly, then pressed his lips against her forehead. "Like I said, she had her reasons."

"It might help if I knew them."

Nick drew back slightly, as if startled. "It matters that much?" When Natalie looked down, she heard him sigh. "I'm not sure, but I think she was going to let both LaCroix and I believe that she was dead."

Now it was her turn to be surprised. Natalie looked back at him. "I didn't know she could do that."

"Neither did I. Or LaCroix. I think he's going to be keeping a closer eye on her. Something's different about her. Something's changed."

"We all have to grown up some time," said Natalie softly.

"Maybe we do." Nick smiled and caressed her cheek with the back of his hand, then took a step around her and toward the door. "Speaking of which, my break's over. Schanke should be finished with that souvlaki by now." He turned and asked hopefully, "You wouldn't happen to have any breath mints or gum or anything that I could give him?"

"I should make you take it like a man." Natalie walked to her desk, opened the top drawer, and dished out a package of gum. "But I have a soft heart."

"I know." Nick caught the package and smiled, but he sobered when he met her gaze. "What I said about not agreeing to anything without a lawyer present. I meant it."

"Believe me, I'll have a notary on call twenty-four hours a day from now on." Natalie watched him head for the door, then asked, "Nick?"

He stopped, turning lightly on his heel. "Hmnm?"

"Do you think . . . would it have been worth it if Janette had gotten away?"

"No. The cost was too high for her freedom." Nick's expression darkened and he shook his head. "Or for mine."

Natalie watched the door swing shut behind him, then walked over to her desk and picked up the bouquet of flowers. Breathing deeply, she closed her eyes and inhaled the scents of summer.

And when she opened them again, the clock said she had two and a half more hours until she'd be released from civil servitude.



ANN ARIMER
June 1966
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